

Halo: Legacy

by Don113

Category: Halo, Star Wars

Genre: Adventure, Sci-Fi

Language: English

Characters: Jun-A266/Noble Three, Stormtroopers

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2012-04-18 02:38:06

Updated: 2013-01-01 17:01:17

Packaged: 2016-04-27 02:11:35

Rating: T

Chapters: 5

Words: 36,639

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: The invasion of Harvest led the UNSC to initiate a punishing counter-attack against the Galactic Empire. Although the initial assault appears to be successful, HIGHCOM knows that it's only a matter of time before the Empire strikes back.

1. Chapter 1

****_Halo: Legacy_****

****_Chapter One_****

****0800 hrs, August 31, 2561 (Military Calendar)/
>D CO 19th BN 24th INF 105th DIV
Aldera, Alderaan****

Sergeant Neil Smith led his squad—or what remained of it—inside a wrecked corner shop, MA5C assault rifle in hand. Four pairs of boots crushed bits of delicate tableware as they moved further inside, taking cover from the gunship that had wrecked his platoon less than five minutes prior. The LAAT/i gunship, a staple of the former Grand Army of the Republic and now the Imperial Army, was hunting Smith and his men, seemingly intent on finishing the job. The GAR had used it with awesome effect on the droid forces of the Separatists during the Clone Wars, and it was proving to be just as deadly against the UNSC's ground forces; they referred to it as The Reaper.

Smith did not know that Operation: LOW GEAR, the liberation of Alderaan, was actually going well, with the UNSC pushing forth relentlessly against the Imperial defenders despite a concerted enemy counter-attack, the latter of which was hindered by the concentrated efforts of the Alderaanian Resistance, itself supported by the nascent Rebel Alliance. In the ODST non-com's world, there was just him, his Marines and the gunship that was stalking them.

"Motherfucker doesn't know when to give up," said Lance Corporal

Heather Nicks. She clutched an SRS99D S2 AM sniper rifle. She was very good with it, but the weapon was useless against the thick armor of a 'larty', as they were known.

Corporal Eric Saunders peeked around a corner, his finger on the trigger of his BR55HB battle rifle. He was Nicks's spotter, but at the moment he wasn't spotting targets. "He's hovering, Sarge. I think he knows we're here."

"If he did, we'd be toast already," said Private First Class Don Bratton. He was a medic, and he held an M7 submachine gun. "Unless he's just screwing with us."

"Stow it," Smith said. "And stay still."

The signature sound of the LAAT/i's engine reverberated through the shop, an ominous rumbling sound that went into a higher pitch when the gunship moved. The bits of china still intact in the shop tinkled, some falling to the floor and shattering. The ODSs held their breath. Accustomed to being outnumbered, outgunned and surroundedâ€"part of the job description, some joked, though it wasn't far from the truthâ€"the ODSs nevertheless held the same fear for The Reaper as the rest of the infantry. And none of the Marines in the shop had the ordnance to take it out.

The engine pitch went higher; the gunship was moving off. The four ODSs stayed still until the sound vanished, leaving only the distant pops and explosions that signified the continuing assault. They breathed a collective sigh of relief. "Let's move further up," Smith said. "Rooftop."

"Won't that expose us, Sarge?"

"Our mission is to spot artillery targets and cover the rest of the company," Smith replied, though he felt his words were hollow.

Evidently, so did Bratton. "Sarge, we just lost the entire fucking platoon. The bastard that did it is still out there. And we don't even know where the rest of Delta is." He didn't have to add that with the enemy gunship and its powerful electronics package still out there, they ran the high risk of luring it back as soon as they activated their radio, which Saunders was carrying.

Saunders suddenly hissed, "Contact. I've got eyes on twelve stormies. They've got that new armor on."

Further down the street, a dozen Imperial stormtroopers moved carefully towards the shop. They wore pure white armor that was like yet unlike the famous clone trooper armor. The signature T-visor was replaced with two small eye-holes, making the helmet look very skull-like. As far as intel knew, every single storm trooper unit was replacing the Phase-II armor with the new set.

"Fuck," Smith said. "That gunship must've deployed them." There was only one way to go. "Let's move to the top floor and set up there. See if we can call in support."

The others raised their eyebrows, but nodded. There was no way they could fight off twelve storm troopers in that enclosed spot.

Carefully, they moved up the stairs, keeping an eye out for enemies following them.

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"Blast it, blast it, blast it," Moff Brannock muttered, clutching the case tightly as he ran up the ramp into the shuttle. The contents of the case were very precious indeed; he had been told by none other than Palpatine himself that should it fall into enemy hands, Brannock was as good as dead. And Brannock knew exactly how Palpatine liked to execute his victims: a long, drawn-out affair with all the Grand Moffs watching as he died a slow, excruciatingly painful death. He'd be lucky if a stray bullet or blaster bolt caught him instead.

Foolishly, he had decided to stop over at Alderaan to visit his son, who had been deployed there ahead of the UNSC's expected invasion. He hadn't anticipated that UNSC warships would suddenly appear in the sky, dropping off scores of shock troopers and fighters and tanks. And now, those shock troopers were poised to take the main spaceport in Aldera.

The shuttle pilot was impatient, his engines set to take himself and his passenger far away from Alderaan. He was listening to the incoming reports, and his frown deepened. The UNSC was pushing forth relentlessly, despite a spirited defense in the air and on the ground. It was only a matter of time before the remaining Imperial fighters were blown out of the sky, rendering him unable to fly; he was sure that the fearsome F/A-32 Spatha fightersâ€"or worse, the F-117 Katana interceptorsâ€"would immediately shoot down an Imperial shuttle. He had only one trick left to play.

His co-pilot rushed into the cockpit. "He's onboard," she said.

"About karking time," the pilot muttered. "Let's get the hell out of here, and keep an eye out for those blasted fighters. We're going to be flying at treetop level 'til we're well away from here."

The co-pilot frowned. "They'll still detect us."

"Not if we have our shields down."

"What?"

"Civilian air speeders don't have shields, and I've slapped a civilian transponder on here," the pilot explained. "Hopefully, the UNSC wouldn't dare shoot down a civilian vehicle."

The shuttle roared out of the hangar bay, just as ODSTs charged into the area. A few of the black-clad men fired a few shots at the shuttle, purely out of frustration. All of the rounds fell short, and none would have pierced the thick armor anyway. But the captain leading them decided that even if he didn't get the fleeing HVT (High-Value Target), someone else would.

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**0808 hrs

>UNSC Oahu (FFG-848)

>3000 meters above Aldera

The overall operation was being directed from the cruiser _Valkyrie_, in orbit above Alderaan. But one particular segment of the operation, namely the air operation, was being run out of the frigate _Oahu_. The Imperial fighters were putting up one hell of a fight; a large thirty-craft formation of ARC-170 heavy fighter/bombers had managed to force the frigate to retreat a few miles north of the city. F-117 Katanas were pushing back, but the damage was done and the reason behind the determined counterattack was realized. TAC had detected a launch from the main spaceport, and ODSTs on the ground had confirmed that it was a Theta T2-c shuttle, used by high-ranking Imperial officials. They'd almost succeeded in fooling them; the _Oahu_'s sensors had registered the shuttle as a civilian vehicle for some reason, and only the ODSTs' presence had managed to correct that assumption. The problem was that none of the UNSC's air units could get to it. They had a track on the shuttle, which was of little comfort to _Oahu_'s CO.

"The target's moving south-southwest, sir," TAC reported. He looked up. "A mechanized unit's moving in there to reinforce a company of ODSTs that were jumped by Imperial airborne units. 1st Armored Cav."

"What kind of vehicles?" the CO asked.

"Cougars."

"Alert them, and tell them to shoot it down the moment they see it." _Better that the bastard be dead than escape_, he thought.

"Aye aye, sir."

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**0814 hrs

>D CO 19th BN 24th INF 105th DIV
Aldera, Alderaan**

Bratton fired a spray of 5x23mm Full Metal Jacket rounds down the stairwell. The helmeted face he'd shot at quickly vanished back into cover. "They're trying to move up the stairs, Sarge. And I'm running low." He flicked the setting to semi-auto to conserve ammo.

"Drop a frag in there," Smith replied.

"Got it." Bratton grabbed an M9 fragmentation grenade, pulled the pin, flicked off the thumb safety and tossed it down the stairs. He jumped backwards to avoid the lethal hail of shrapnel as the grenade exploded. He peeked back down. Shouting and curses echoed up. "Dunno if I got anybody, Sarge. But if they're still alive, they sure ain't happy."

That wasn't much of a relief to Smith. Sooner or later, things would go bad. "Good," he said anyway.

Saunders looked up from his corner, where he'd been trying to work the com gear. "Sarge, we've got good news. 1st Armored is on the way, and a Cougar's coming to pick us up."

That was a great bit of relief. If the LAAT/i was the terror of the

infantry, the M184C Cougar Infantry Fighting Vehicle was its bane. The dual-barrel M70 Gauss Cannon could tear through it like it was nothing more than a moth.

"There it is," Nicks said.

"The Cougar?"

"I wish."

The odd sound of the gunship's engine once again filled the air. It had returned to finish the job. But before Smith could do anything more than swear, another sound was heard: the rapid metallic-clanging-sound of a Cougar's M70 firing for all it was worth. The Gauss rounds tore through the gunship's cockpit, and it spiraled to the ground with an almighty crash. Marine regulars ran towards the crash site to secure it.

"There's the Cougar," Nicks smiled. "Hello, boys."

"Friendlies coming up!" came a voice from below. A head wearing a green helmet appeared. "Put that thing away, son."

Bratton lowered his SMG as a Marine captain came up the stairs. "We're your relief, Sergeant. Let's get out of here."

"What about the artillery spotting, sir?" Smith asked. Now that the immediate danger was out of the way, he could think about why he was here in the first place.

"Not important anymore," the captain replied. "We've got new orders."

"Eyes on an Imp shuttle," Nicks said suddenly. "Flying low and fast. It'll overfly us."

The captain whistled. "Speak of the devil." He spoke a few words into his boom mike.

Once again, the M70 rattled away as the shuttle approached. The gunner was good; he waited until the last possible moment so that the pilot couldn't evade in time. The gauss rounds pierced the portside engine, and the shuttle veered off, trailing smoke. "Nice shot," Saunders said.

"Anyone can hit anything with a gauss cannon," Nicks said derisively.

"Let's move," the captain said. "We have to secure the crash site."

As they ran down the stairs to the street, they saw eight storm troopers kneeling with their hands on their heads, watched closely by a few Marines, while four others lay side by side. Bratton grinned. "I knew I'd got some of them."

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**0817 hrs
>Imperial Shuttle Corulag

>8 miles Southwest of Aldera

The co-pilot groaned. The crash had given her a nasty bump, knocking her out. She didn't know how long she'd been unconscious. So, the gambit had failed. She'd almost been sure that they would make it. Intel had said there were no UNSC forces to the south and that they had retreated from the airborne units' counter-attack.

That assumption had ended quite abruptly by a stream of hypervelocity rounds. She wondered why she was still alive. "I'm OK," she said. "I'm alright." She turned to the pilot and realized why she was the only one in the cockpit speaking.

The pilot's neck was bent at an unnatural angle, his face showing an expression of mild surprise. She didn't bother to check his vitals; even if his neck hadn't been so obviously broken, his eyes were glassy and unseeing. The co-pilot unbuckled herself, realizing at once that her ankle was sprained. Nonetheless, she limped towards the passenger area to make sure their charge was alive.

One look told the story. A piece of bulkhead had hit Moff Brannock in the head, leaving it a horrible, red pulpy mass. A blood-spattered case was still gripped in his hands.

She sat down heavily, spewing a stream of curses in Huttese. This was all Brannock's fault. The blasted idiot just had to make a little side-trip. All he had to do was head straight to Korriban. By all rights, they should have been there already. Now, the brightest thing she could look forward to was being captured. Would she be captured? She didn't know. She'd been told that the UNSC took no prisoners, that they let injured soldiers bleed out, or shot them in the stomach to make death extremely painful. The ODSTs were supposed to be the worst; being female, she would be used as a plaything until they finally killed her.

She stiffened. She could hear an engine running, the crunch of wheels on dirt and gravel. Voices now, urgent and clipped, orders being given. She couldn't hear them clearly. The light from the cockpit was briefly blocked, and she knew they were looking inside. "Pilot's dead, sir," she heard a man say. "Fuck, poor bastard's neck is broken."

There was a screech of metal, and light flooded into the passenger compartment. Armored figures were outlined against the sunlight. "Jesus," said one, holding a long rifle of some sort. To the co-pilot's surprise, it was a woman's voice. "Blood all over the place."

"Wait!" said another. "We've got a live one!"

The co-pilot didn't even bother going for her sidearm, which was quickly yanked out of its holster. Two figures loomed over her: a man in green armor and a man in black armor. The latter had a full-face helmet with a silver visor, an ODST according to the intelligence reports. The other was a dark-skinned male, looking on with concern. That was another surprise. "Get a medic over here!" the ODST shouted over his shoulder.

"She OK, Sergeant?" asked the man in green.

"Broken ankle, Captain," the ODS'T replied. "Leastways, that's what it looks like." He leaned closer. "Ma'am, can you hear me? Ma'am?"

The co-pilot could only nod, but the ODS'T seemed to take encouragement from that. So did the captain. "What's your name, young lady?" he asked kindly.

"Anna Badure," she managed to whisper. "Lieutenant, Imperial Navy."

The captain looked at what was left of Moff Brannock. "Who was that unfortunate bastard?"

Badure was disoriented, but not enough for the UNSC captain to get her to talk about classified things. "I can't say."

The captain grunted. "Judging by all those red and blue blocks, he's a Moff. Why don't we just stop wasting time and get to the point, before ONI gets its gloves on you?"

Another ODS'T ran up, pulling out a med kit. He snapped to look at the two others. "Captain, Sarge: I appreciate the importance of what you're doing, but she needs medical attention. Questioning her can wait."

The captain glared back. "Private, don't test me."

"Bratton, go ahead," the first ODS'T said, interrupting smoothly. "Sir, if you'll follow me."

The angry captain was led away. The ODS'T medic depolarized his visor to reveal a normal human face. "Don't worry about them, ma'am. You'll be alright." He stuck her with a needle, and she quickly drifted off to sleep.

The 1st Armored Cavalry Division ended up breaking the Imperial counter-attack, allowing the UNSC to place anti-air batteries around Aldera. With the air above the capital now denied to them, the Imperials had little to hold off the UNSC frigates, which proceeded to destroy most of the remaining Imperial fighters. The surviving pilots either voluntarily surrendered, landing their fighters and making for the nearest UNSC patrols to turn themselves in to; or, in the case of the ARC-170 pilots, used their built-in hyperspace drives to retreat from the system altogether. The battle was a major victory; the UNSC had seized a Core World, and support for the Empire was dwindling.

Moff Brannock's body and the case he held was recovered by the Marines, who handed it off to their Field Intelligence officers. From there, the Office of Naval Intelligence took possession of both. From intelligence taken from Aldera they determined the dead man's identity, while they discovered that the case held a datachip that was so heavily encrypted that even their best AI weren't sure they could crack it within a year. ONI noticed that a few high-ranking Imperial officials mysteriously died immediately following the recovery of the Brannock Chip, as it was now being called, and some presumed that it had something to do with the chip itself.

Lieutenant Badure was taken to Aldera General Hospital for immediate

treatment. From there, ONI officers took her into their custody, ignoring the protests of the hospital staff. ONI transferred her to the hospital ship UNSC _Hopeful_, where she was placed in a secure ward and interrogated lengthily, albeit gently, for a week. Badure refused to divulge any classified information she knew for four days, then finally let slip Brannock's intended destination on the fifth day. Two days later, her interrogators determined she didn't know anything else that was relevant to their investigation and she was transferred to the POW Ward to convalesce alongside other Imperials captured in combat.

ONI was also interested by the massive slaving operation on Kashyyyk, where the native Wookiees were disappearing by the thousands, packed into transport ships that went off to destinations unknown. Admiral Marcus Stanley, head of ONI, pressed for and finally received approval of a covert operation on Kashyyyk. The goal was to find out where the Wookiees were being taken to and disrupt the slaving operation. Their other, long-term goal was to crack the encryption on the Brannock Chip and prepare a mission to Korriban.

Not a single person involved in the operation knew that they had set in motion a series of operations that would reach well beyond anything anyone could have predicted.

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2. Chapter 2

****_Chapter Two_****

****0010 hrs, October 9th, 2561 (Military Calendar)/
>NOBLE TeamWookiee Resistance
>Kachirho, Kashyyyk**

Lieutenant Commander Daniel B-170 had never expected to encounter any alien that would even come close to being as tall as a Brute and have it be friendly. And while the Wookiees of Kashyyyk were on average shorter than the average Brute, they were still amazingly strong. Even better, they were hardly the near-feral animals that the Brutes were; they were fully capable of applying their rage to appropriate situations only, and could actually pull off stealth missions.

The leader of the Wookiee Resistance here was a being named Tarfful, an altogether sensible Wookiee who was invaluable because of his intimate knowledge of the city of Kachirho. It was no surprise, seeing that he was once the ruler of the city before the Empire came. Although the giant wroshyr tree that had made up most of the city was still severely damaged from the Imperial invasion, many sections had been repaired enough for it to act as a functioning spaceport. It was, in fact, the only spaceport allowed to operate by the Empire, and the Empire was in full control of it.

That would change tonight.

Aside from being the only spaceport in operation on the entire planet, Kachirho was also the one place where slaves could be brought, either for purchase by delighted Trandoshans or for labor purposes by the Empire. Recently however, the Empire had suspended sales to the Trandoshans and tempered the latter's anger at this

with the threat of orbital bombardment. For now, any Wookiee slaves were for Imperial use only. That meant that there were only Imperials and Wookiee slaves in Kachirho at the moment, which suited UNSC HIGHCOM and the UN Government just fine; they didn't need to accidentally kill any Trandoshans and drag the reptilian race into the war.

The Empire would move its slaving operation to the almost-completed skyhook nearly a hundred miles away within a month, or so intel said. The skyhook was heavily protected and the Wookiees knew little about the defenses there. This was their only shot at finding out what exactly was going on.

"NOBLE One in position," Daniel said softly. _NOBLE One_, he repeated silently to himself, smiling slightly. Ever since Lieutenant Commanderâ€| no, _Commander_ Julian Grey had become the new NOBLE Actual (the previous NOBLE Actual, now-Rear Admiral Miles Stanley, had become head of Section Three, his uncle Adm. Marcus Stanley's previous post), Daniel had been chosen to lead NOBLE in the field.

Still, NOBLE wasn't at full strength; it hadn't been since Reach. Even with Rosenda B-344 in the team, only three Spartans were with NOBLE Teamâ€| not including Grey, an "Original Spartan" from the SPARTAN Project's predecessor, ORION. Both Daniel and Grey had made it clear to RADM Stanley that they did not want any Gamma Company Spartans in their team. While they were Spartan-IIIs like Daniel. Jun and Rosenda, the Gamma-series commandos were prone to extreme aggression thanks to illegal drugs used in their augmentations. Even though Daniel would always be loyal to LCDR Kurt Ambrose, he didn't think that Gamma-Series Spartans would be useful for spec-ops. If anything, they were useful as shock troops. Some didn't share his opinions, he knew. But NOBLE was _his_ team now.

"NOBLE Two, in position and holding," Chief Warrant Officer Jun A-266 whispered, breaking Daniel's chain of thought. An original member of NOBLE Team, Jun was the only survivor of the debacle at Reach, and to this day he refused to discuss how he had survived. His psych evaluations showed that whatever he did to survive, the experience was quite traumatic. However, it hadn't affected his performance in the field. He was the team sniper, as always, and one of the best in UNSC service.

"NOBLE Three here," said the final member of NOBLE, Warrant Officer Rosenda B-344. A level-headed, sometimes cheeky commando, Rosenda was the team's SAW (Squad Automatic Weapon) gunner, wielding an M250 Light Machine Gun. She knew how to stay quiet too, packing an M7S SMG as backup. _"We've got increased activity. Looks like they're prepping to load another group of Wookiees onto the slave ship."_

The slave ship was actually a stripped-down Acclamator-Class Assault Ship from one of the first batch of frigate/transport given to the Republic Navy at the start of the Clone Wars. With the Empire using the updated Acclamator II-Class, these older Acclamators were used for transport only, and had minimal defenses. They carried anything from troops and supplies toâ€|in this particular caseâ€|boatloads of slaves.

"When I hit the detonators, smoke the first group of guards. Then

fire at will."

"Copy." The group of guards and Wookiee prisoners filed out into the open, and they had to cross a 900 meter expanse of loading dock between the main trunk of the Kachirho Tree and the loading ramp of the Acclamator. The guards knew this, and began taking longer steps to cover the distance quickly.

Daniel waited, then hit the detonator.

The stormtrooper barracks was abruptly transformed from a duracrete-durasteel structure into a mammoth fireball as the M168 Demolition Charges exploded, sending chunks of building and stormtrooper parts into the sky to finally rain down on the stunned group of guards and Wookiees. Again, Daniel hit the detonator, and the beams holding up the gunship pad blew apart. The pad dropped free—with three LAAT/i gunships—and came crashing down on a guard house just as the lights in the latter came on. Daniel twisted the dial to the third frequency, giving just enough time for the automated defenses to come online, then hit the detonator a final time. The auto-turrets blew apart. He knew that he could've blown them all simultaneously, but he wanted to maximize confusion in the enemies' ranks.

During all these explosions, the guards on the loading dock found themselves being cut down by 6.8mm rounds from Rosenda's M250. Those seeking cover from her fire discovered they weren't safe, either; Jun, from an adjacent perch almost a mile away, put them down with precise fire from his SRS99 AM sniper rifle.

The Wookiee prisoners weren't standing idle. When everything became chaos, they saw the opportunity and took it, tearing apart the guards that Rosenda and Jun hadn't gotten. One found the lead guard—cut in half by Rosenda's LMG—and found the button to release all the shackles. Everything was bathed in a fiery glow, and Daniel thought it was almost like they'd dropped the Imperials into hell, complete with hellfire and raging monsters.

Suddenly, white searchlights illuminated the dock. An LAAT/i from a neighboring base had arrived, and it began firing on anything that moved. Wookiees began falling. But Daniel had prepared for this eventuality, too.

From somewhere to his right, a PLEX missile soared through the air, slamming into the gunship's cockpit. It dropped like a rock, slamming into the tree before its crumpled remains rolled down towards the giant roots. The Wookiee who had fired the "liberated" Imperial ordnance roared in triumph.

"NOBLE One, on the move," Daniel said. He motioned to the Wookiees, and zip-lined down towards the main building's observation platform. He crashed through the window, firing as he did. There were few Imperials in Observation, and few returned fire. Those who did immediately tried to flee as Daniel was joined by Tarfful and his Wookiees, but they didn't get far. "Observation's secure, Rebel One's got it covered. Noble Two, remain in place. Three, RV at the dock." He didn't have to say that they barely had two hours for NOBLE to break into the ship, retrieve the necessary navigational data and get out while Tarfful's rebels freed the rest of the slaves and retrieved any intel from the Imperial base. "You'll take over here?" he asked

the chieftain.

"Wharrrooooooooo," Tarfful rumbled. Thankfully for Daniel, the MJOLNIR's language software translated this to: "Affirmative." A few more rumbles, growls, a bark: "You should move quickly. They'll come with reinforcements soon."

"Got it." He ran out the door, MA4A SOPMOD Carbine gripped tightly in his hands.

The Wookiees were taking over quickly, he saw. Many were securing weapons and supplies, or freeing other slaves. Others were mopping up remaining Imperial resistance. There were few of the latter; seeing an enraged Wookiee tearing a hapless officer's arms off usually ensured complete cooperation. What few stormtroopers remained did put up a spirited resistance here and there. Many of these had fought against the Wookiees during the initial subjugation years before, and had experience in dealing with them. They did not have experience dealing with Spartans, however, and Daniel dealt with them quickly and efficiently.

The dock was just as Daniel had seen it from above, a nightmare tableau of flames, dead Wookiees and guards and burning crates. Rosenda was there, waiting for him behind a crate. "Took you long enough, Boss," she said. "Sightseeing?"

"While I can," Daniel replied. "Any of the ship's crew come out?"

"No. I'm guessing they're scared that the big, hairy monsters are coming to get 'em. But they haven't closed their ramps and flown off."

"That's because they think the cavalry's gonna ride in and save the dayâ€¦ and they don't want to face Vader's wrath if they cut and run. They're still prepped to receive slaves." He put a hand to his ear, a purely reflexive action that he still did whenever he commed someone. "NOBLE Two, you still with me?"

"Affirmative, Boss."

"See any Imp reinforcements?"

"I see gunships, but they're keeping their distance. I guess losing one made them nervous. Best part is that the slave ship can't open fire with its big guns, or it'll risk collapsing the entire tree on itself."

"Good. Make sure the gunships stay that way. Direct the Wookiee launchers to optimal positions and keep an eye out."

"Affirmative. Two out."

"Let's move out," Daniel muttered. Without waiting for Rosenda's reply, he got up, vaulted over the crate and broke into a run. Rosenda was wise enough to keep her cursing off the com channels, but it still amused the Lieutenant Commander enough.

He had just placed an armored boot onto the loading ramp when red needles of deadly energy lanced toward him, courtesy of E-Web guns

placed by the ship's crew. He didn't slow down, knowing that it was better to be a moving target than a static one, dimly aware that his shields were dropping at an alarming rate. He bent forward as far as he could without falling, dashing from side to side while Rosenda sent covering fire over his head. He charged the nearest E-Web, vaulting over the gun and its surprised operator, twisted in midair and fired a burst. The wild shot was far from accurate, but one of the three bullets neatly transited the gunner's head, splitting it open like a melon. Before the others could bring their E-Webs to bear, they began falling, their lives snuffed by SAW and carbine rounds. It seemed like an hour later that everything fell silent save the echoes of gunfire reverberating through the cargo bay. In reality, it was just a few minutes.

"You know how to show a lady a good time, don't ya, Boss?" Rosenda said, nudging a body with her boot.

"I thought you'd like it," Daniel replied in mock seriousness. "Besides, you're not really the chocolates-and-flowers kinda gal anyway."

"Hard to argue with thatâ€¦"

He looked at the bodies. "Prison guards, all of them." He bent down to examine a patch. "Imperial Corrections. Not one single regular or stormtrooper."

"Complaining, Boss?"

Daniel shook his head. "You know as well as I do that something's off."

"You think that if there's important intel on board this tin-can, they'd have had a bigger welcome party?" Rosenda said, voicing Daniel's thoughts. "We haven't gotten to the bridge yet. Night's still young," she added with a grin.

Daniel slapped a new magazine into the MA4A's receiver. "Yes it is."

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The slave ship had no traditional name in Imperial records, although the crew liked to call it the Dustpan, in reference to how they scooped up the trash of the galaxy. Officially, it was the 14T, one of several stripped-down and repurposed Acclamators meant to carry slaves and other galactic refuse to penal colonies across the Empire. Today, the 14T was carrying a special cargo. The nature of that cargo was such that the commander of the vessel was now wishing he had simply gone straight to his destination instead of stopping to pick up his regular cargo of Wookiee slaves. But orders were orders, and his superiors felt that the UNSC would know that something was up if they noticed that the 14T hadn't picked up its usual cargoâ€”as if they could tell the difference between one Acclamator and another, the commander had grumped, especially now that they were all uniformly gray, the new color of the Imperial Navy. Red was no longer the official color, it being a reference to the defunct Galactic Republic.

Despite this, a good part of the vessel was now covered in red.

Specifically, human blood, seeping from bullet holed punched through the dead crewmen who were trying in vain to stop the two UNSC supersoldiers from progressing further into the ship.

"Incompetents!" Commander Sarkli shouted into the intercom. "There's only two of them. Two!"

"But, they're Spartans," _said a nervous Imperial Corrections Officer, staring back at a security cam. _"We can'tâ€"_"_

Sarkli watched, dumbfounded, as an armored figure walked into the view of the camera and casually shot it, changing the view to a grainy blue feed just as the now-dead ICO collapsed from a head shot. "Damn youâ€|" he trailed off as another figure entered the bridge. His blood went cold.

The Royal Guard was the Emperor's personal guard unit, tasked with his protection and devoted completely to him, body and soul. Highly skilled, exceedingly dangerous, even they had individuals among them that were deadlier than the others. Unlike their red-robed brethren, these men were dressed entirely in black, armed with a lightsaber pike and an assortment of other weapons. Some said they were once Jedi, tortured and brainwashed by the Emperor himself. Others had darker rumors. But all agreed that the Emperor's Shadow Guard was to be feared, by friend and foe alike. "They must not discover the prisoner," the Guard said in a hoarse voice. Just hearing it made Sarkli think of Death itself. "Your men have failed. _I_ will deal with this nuisance."

Sarkli wasn't foolish enough to object. "Very well. Shall I send reinforcements with you?"

"Unnecessary," the Shadow Guard replied shortly. Without another word, he walked off, leaving behind a very frightened and confused commander.

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"Dammit," Rosenda muttered almost ten minutes later. "All these fucking blast doors are slowing us down, even with the Master Key." The latter was a device that was designed to crack the codes on most Imperial blast doors. She looked at him. "Cut through the cell blocks?"

"A lotta felons down there," Daniel reminded her. "Not just Rebels."

"Then you better not drop the soap, Boss." She looked around and spotted a grate. "This garbage chute should lead us down there."

"Should?"

"Unless they changed up the layout of an Acclamator since I was last on one, yeah." She kicked the grate, sending it hurtling down the chute. "After you, Boss?"

"Ladies first, Warrant Officer." He looked around, hearing boots thundering down the adjacent hallway. "Double time." He gave her ten

seconds head start, then followed her down after leaving a farewell gift in the form of an M9 High-Explosive-Dual-Purpose grenade. He heard the thunderous boom as he landed in knee-deep sewage, balancing out his satisfaction at killing a few more Imperials with the knowledge that he was wading through their accumulated filth.

"Don't say anything, Boss," Rosenda said. "I know what we're walking through."

"Ok," Daniel said. "How about instead I point out that door that's shut tight and probably magnetically sealed?"

Rosenda turned to look at said door. "Goddamnit." She kicked at it, getting nothing more than a loud clanging sound for her efforts. "Hey," she said suddenly. "You think that plasma grenades can short the magnetic seals? It has to be electromagnets."

"Right," Daniel said. "But we don't have plasma grenades."

Rosenda shook her head. "Correction, Boss. You don't have plasma grenades." She pulled one of the shiny blue Covenant explosives out of her belt, tossing it up in the air and catching it.

"That's contraband, you know," Daniel said weakly.

Rosenda gave a short laugh. "You can throw me in the brig when we get back, then. Stand back."

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The Jedi managed to raise her head. The sounds of battle had barely stirred her from her drug-induced stupor, but something had caught her attention. As the dark whirlwind of energy made its way toward her, she recognized the source: the Imperial Shadow Guard that had been her captor for almost three weeks.

"So, Jedi, they come for you," the Shadow Guard hissed. "I wonder, will they be as surprised to see you alive as Vader was?"

The Jedi managed a smile. "Don't you mean, 'Lord Vader'?"

"I answer to His Imperial Majesty, not Vader," he said harshly. "And I caught you! Barriss Offee." He smiled. "It is a wonder, really, that you survived. Almost point blank, was it? And from the main guns of a walker, no less." He pulled back her hood, revealing a burned scalp. "But not entirely unscathed. What a shame. You were quite striking."

Barriss did not say anything, but remembered the explosion on Felucia. She had come to almost four hours later, heavily burned and in extreme pain. The locals had helped her at first, hiding her from the Empire and treating her injuries. She had healed to the point where she could call upon the Force to assist the process, and when she was able to walk she left the planet. During her convalescence she learned of the Purge, how she was one of very few Jedi to survive. She also learned of recent events, the Imperial-Colonial War, and the refuge on Harvest. She had attempted to flee there, only to be discovered by Vader. She barely escaped his clutches. A day later, the Shadow Guard caught her. Why she was still alive, she

didn't know. But she could guess. The Shadow Guard had to have been a fallen Jedi, a man who had embraced the dark side of the Force and become a thrall of the Emperor. If that was what the Emperor had in mind for her, death seemed like a much more attractive option.

There was another explosion, closer and louder. The Shadow Guard's head snapped around. "Excuse me," he said. "I have guests to entertain." With that he left, being sure to reengage the ray shields, an altogether unnecessary measure since she was thoroughly shackled.

He didn't have to tell her. Even before he had said it, she felt the other two in the Force. In the sea of depressed, angry and mostly psychotic thoughts emanating from her fellow prisoners, these newcomers and their unwavering confidence were like a beacon in the darkness. They weren't here for her, she knew; it was likely they didn't even know she was here. They did not expect the Shadow Guard. But even shackled and drugged, she could help them. She closed her eyes, and opened herself up to the living Force.

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Daniel stopped in his tracks. Ever since they had escaped the garbage disposal, he had felt like there was another presence in his head, something cold and dark. He didn't like it. Perhaps it was the inmates, many of whom were hooting and hollering at Rosenda's obviously female figure. Perhaps it was the cell blocks themselves, designed to be as depressing as possible. The noise was incredibly disturbing.

"'!"

"Who's going to be my girlfriend tonight? Someone's gonna be my girlfriend at showertime!"

"Killmekillmekillmeâ€|""_

"You just wait, when I get out of hereâ€|""_

"Hey baby, why dontcha take off that armor and take a ride onâ€|""_

"How can they even tell that I'm a woman in this armor?" Rosenda wondered.

"The way you walk and run," Daniel replied. "Variation in the hip-sagittal plane."

"I'm in full armor," Rosenda said in clear disgust at the leering prisoners. "I don't usually get this reaction even if I'm naked."

"That's because we're military," Daniel replied. "Go through cryo procedure together and all that. These idiots probably haven't had any sinceâ€|" ever."

"You're one to talk, Boss."

"Says the involuntary lust object of the Galaxy's Most Wanted." He frowned. "There it is again. Whatever it is."

"Yeah," Rosenda said, aiming a kick at a bony hand groping for her ankle. "I thought so too. Not just the prisoners, or this place. It's something else."

Behind you! Something shouted in Daniel's head. There was no time to think, so he dove for the deck. There was a red glow and the tell-tale buzz of an energy blade. He completed the roll, turned and brought his weapon up. The mysterious attacker was dressed entirely in black, armed with a pike with a red lightsaber blade at the end. His mind went into overdrive, sifting through all the intel reports he'd read even as he brought his weapon to bear. _Shadow Guard_, he realized. _Elite sub-unit of the Royal Guard_. Daniel had barely gotten the Shadow Guard in his sights when the guard extended an open hand, as if to signal him to halt. Then, it felt like he was hit by a truck; he flew back several meters, crashing into a cell. _He has Force powers_, he realized.

Two hands in orange prison garb grabbed his throat. In one hand was a crude stabbing instrument. "Time to die, sonny boy," a voice hissed.

"I don't have time for your shit," Daniel replied evenly, grabbing both hands and crushing them. Without pause, he got up, picked up his rifle and dashed back into the fight, trailed by the con's screams of pain.

Rosenda had dropped her SMG, being fully occupied with grabbing the lightsaber pike to prevent herself from being sliced in half. She was surprised; a normal human wouldn't be able to match her in strength, especially with the added benefit of the MJOLNIR armor. But it was all she could do to slow the pike's descent. The red glow of the blade filled her vision.

Suddenly, the Shadow Guard looked behind him, startled. Then he stumbled as a burst of 6.8mm rounds struck him in the back. He lost his grip on the pike. Rosenda didn't waste the opportunity, wrenching the weapon from him. He raised his hand again, and Rosenda flew back into Daniel. But even as she was flying through the air, she threw the pike like a javelin, sending the weapon whistling towards the Shadow Guard.

The Guard simply caught it nonchalantly.

The two Spartans got up slowly. "This is annoying," Daniel said.

"You are no match for the power of the dark side," the Guard said. "It would be easier if you submit and accept your death."

Daniel laughed as stepped forward, fully aware that his carbine had fallen from his grasp and was currently at the Guard's feet. "Maybe. But, power of the dark side and all that aside, that pike's not very effective in closed spaces, is it?" The Guard was about to reply when he realized his mistake: he had been focused on the advancing Spartan when he should have been looking at the other one.

Rosenda had brought her M250 to bear. At a rate of 950 rounds per minute, she sent a series of armor-piercing rounds into the Guard. In the narrow space, he couldn't dodge, and he couldn't bring his Force

powers to bear in time. He shuddered with multiple impacts and fell on his back. As he did, Daniel dashed forward, picked up his carbine and planted his boot on the Guard's chest. "The Force isn't as useful as you think it is, is it?" Rosenda said.

"That witchâ€¦" the Guard coughed. "You have not won today. The Emperor is forever. You will die. You will _all_ die."

"Didn't you know?" Daniel smiled. "Spartans never die." He emptied his magazine, sending the remaining rounds into the unarmored neck area. The Guard shuddered, then went completely still. "Hostile neutralized. That was a nasty surprise. Bit underwhelming though. No wonder the Jedi went down quick during the Purge."

"Speaking of, Boss," Rosenda said, reloading the LMG, "he mentioned 'that witch'. You think there's a Jedi here?"

"Probably, considering the presence of Mister Spanky here, but it's not our problem and we've got other things to worry about."

"Still," Rosenda pressed. "A Jedi. They're high-value, right? Now that we know that there's one here, we can't just leave her."

"Iâ€¦"

"Noble Two to Noble One, we've got Imperial ground forces on the approach," said Jun. _"They've got armor, and they're advancing on the beachhead. The Wookiees are setting up a perimeter, but we won't have enough launchers to take on both the tanks and the gunships."_

"Understood, Two," Daniel responded. "Wait one." He looked up. "The guns on this crate aren't good enough to tango with other warships, but they can blow those larties out of the air. Worse comes to worse, shut 'em down completely. You think you can handle that, Three?"

Rosenda nodded. "Absolutely, Boss. But what'll you do?"

"I'm going to rescue a damsel in distress, of course."

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Jun shifted aim slightly. At this distanceâ€”about two milesâ€”his ability to hit moving targets was significantly reduced. And there were so many targets; the Imperials were going the sea route, riding in on speeders, speeder bikes and fighter tanks. They were clever, weaving back and forth to evade the Wookiee gunners. The Wookiees had appropriated all the Imperial ordnance they could find, using E-Webs and other heavy guns to take on the Imperials. Sadly, there wasn't enough anti-armor ordnance to take out the tanks, and whatever launchers they had were to be used against the gunships unless there was no other option. Jun knew that, if worse came to worse, he could have his forces block off access routes for the enemy's armor units, at least temporarily. But if the gunships came into play, the battle would be measured in minutes.

There. One of the tanksâ€”a 2-M hovertank with antennae associated with a commander's vehicleâ€”had stopped weaving. The commander was

perched on top, his torso out of the top hatch, and though he couldn't hear him at this distance Jun could see that the man was yelling orders, pointing at the beachhead. He gave the target enough lead, compensated for bullet-drop, exhaled and fired.

The 14.5mm x 114mm Armor Piercing round flew true, hitting the enemy commander center-mass and slicing him in half. The gory aftermath was quite impressive, but more importantly it brought the armor column to a sudden halt. The speeders continued on, unaware that their heavy weaponry was not with them. When they came within range of the Wookiee defenses, the results were predictable.

"The counter-attack has been halted," Tarfful said over the com. He sounded surprised.

"They'll be back," Jun replied. "Did your forces get anything useful from their databanks?"

"No," the Wookiee chieftain replied, voicing his disappointment with a growl. _"Only records of their transactions with the accursed Trandoshans."_

"Very well. We'll retreat once my comrades leave their slave ship." He frowned. Someone else was pinging him, tagged with an ONI ID. "This is NOBLE Two."

_"NOBLE Two, this is the _Oberon_. Where's NOBLE One?"_

"He's busy at the moment, _Oberon_," Jun replied. The UNSC _Oberon_, he remembered, was a UNSC stealth frigate.

"You'll need to wrap up whatever it is you're doing and get the hell out of there, ASAP."

"Easier said than done, _Oberon_." He relayed the situation briefly.

There was an extended pause on the other end. _"NOBLE Two, we can enter atmosphere briefly and give you and the rebels time to retreat. But it means destroying Kachirho."_

"Rebel One won't like that."

"It's that, or you get out while he and his people die."

Jun resisted the urge to sigh. "Understood, _Oberon_. Stand by." He closed the link, and wondered how to break this news to an enraged Wookiee chieftain

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UNSC _Oberon_ (FFG/S-448) was one of the newer stealth-oriented Raven-Class frigates, based on the Stalwart-Class light frigates. _Oberon_ was built in 2558, with Project SAKURA—otherwise known as the Navy Commando Initiative—in mind. It was meant to be an operating platform for the Navy Commandos and their predecessors, the Spartans. So far, it had performed eighteen missions, all successes, all without firing a single shot. This would be its first time in battle, and Commander Jeremy Summers was slightly nervous.

"It'll work, sir."

Summers turned to see his executive officer, Lieutenant Commander Lira Whitcomb. Whitcomb was from an extended military family that included legendary war hero Vice Admiral Danforth Whitcomb. LCDR Whitcomb rarely ever mentioned her distant uncle, but her face always shone with pride whenever he was mentioned. "You know the Imps will have us on scanners once we hit atmo."

"That's a risk we can take, sir. NOBLE Two halted a whole battalion with one round. Think how they'll react when a frigate comes barreling out of nowhere. And we'll be gone before they can get to us."

Summers walked over to the Tactical screens. On TAC1, it showed Kashyyyk, with Oberon in blue and the local Imperial task force in red. The Imperial task force, a small group of three Acclamator II-Class Frigates centered on a Venator-Class Star Destroyer, was on the opposite side of the planet in geosynchronous orbit. One of the enemy frigates had broken away from the formation, and it was plain to see that its goal was to reinforce the Imperial forces near Kachirho. It was laden with enough troops and aircraft to make mincemeat out of the Wookiees, and the latter certainly didn't have the ordnance to take on fighter-bombers.

On TAC2, the positions of the Rebel and Imperial ground forces was shown. The Imperials greatly outnumbered the Rebels, but the Rebels were in a superior position and had the ability to deny the air to the Imp gunships. However, Summers knew that once the Imperial armor got back into gear the tide would be turned.

Next, Summers turned to the Weapons station (WEP). Being a new vessel designed in the closing days of the Covenant War, the Oberon had state-of-the-art weaponry for a frigate, including a MAC cannon capable of firing three rounds per charge, twenty Longbow missile pods with thirty missiles per pod, three Shiva-class nuclear warhead-tipped Longbows, eight 50mm point-defense cannons and four Mk2 Directed Energy Weapon emplacements, known as DEW guns. The DEW guns were new weapons, designed as the capital-ship-size version of the hand-held M6 DEW, commonly known as the Spartan Laser. They could be configured for several kinds of energy output, from a disabling blow to a destructive blast. Adding the DEW guns came at a cost; they ran off their own generator, and the room required for this new generator forced Navy designers to reduce the number of missiles usually used by a frigate by half. Another drawback was that charging the guns took longer as firepower was increased.

"We're going in," Summers declared. "All hands, battle stations. WEP, arm two Shivas. Disable the proximity fuse on the first warhead and set it for remote detonation upon encoded transmission."

The WEP officer, a recent academy graduate, looked at his screen and understood immediately. "Aye, sir."

"Helm, plot a sling-shot orbit."

"Aye, sir," NAV replied.

Whitcomb looked at her commander. "Your take on the Keyes Loop, sir?"

"Inspired by it, yes," Summers acknowledged. "But Keyes was commanding a destroyer that couldn't enter atmosphere, whereas we'll have to. And I don't plan on ramming any of those Imp ships if I can help it." He didn't have to say that the Oberon, having less armor than a destroyer, wouldn't survive the sort of impact that the Iroquois did. One advantage that Summers had was Oberon's top-of-the-line reactor, which could push the frigate to extreme speeds. It was a necessary thing for a stealth frigate that needed to get out of trouble quickly.

The Navigation (NAV) officer turned to Summers. "Sir, we just got pinged. It was very brief, but the enemy frigate might have a piece of us."

"Duly noted. Maintain course and speed."

"Aye, sir."

The Acclamator II shifted course slightly in Oberon's general direction. Even with the latter's stealth technology, it was likely that the UNSC vessel had been detected. Still, Summers didn't want to make any drastic moves until he was sure the cat was out of the bag.

He looked at the TAC screens. "Weapons, fire the first Shiva, course mark zero zero one. Full burn for twenty seconds."

"Firing, aye. Missile away." The Shiva-tipped Longbow erupted from its silo, soaring away and in front of Oberon. Kashyyyk's gravitational pull yanked it closer to the planet as it raced into orbit.

"Sir," TAC reported, "Enemy Frigate One just changed course and increased speed. It's moving to intercept."

"Arm the second Shiva."

"Aye sir," WEP reported. "Shiva is armed."

"Target Enemy Frigate One and fire."

"Firing, aye. Missile away. The first Shiva should be reaching the Imperial formation in thirty seconds, sir," he reminded Summers.

"Bring the MAC up to full charge."

"Aye, sir." He turned to another screen. "Splash one. EF One has been hit. Their shields are down."

"Arm Longbow pods A through J and fire on EF One."

"Firing, aye. Missiles away."

Three hundred Longbow missiles launched from their silos, turned sharply and veered towards the Acclamator. Green composite beam lasers flashed, incinerating almost a quarter of them. However, the Imperials' comp beam cannons were not as fast or accurate as Covenant pulse lasers and a vast majority of the missiles made contact with

their target. The hardened nose-cones of conventional Longbows were specifically designed to punch through thick armor, and they performed as advertised, burying themselves deep inside the Acclamator before exploding with tremendous force. The Acclamator listed to port as explosions chained up and down its length.

"Good effect on target," WEP said. He turned to another screen. "First Shiva has reached the Imperial formation."

At almost the same time, NAV nearly yelled, "Imperial formation in visual range!"

Summers knew that the Imperials would immediately discover _Oberon_'s presence the moment the nuke hit the first enemy frigate. If that wasn't enough, then they could track the Longbows back to their source. Whatever the method they used, they had already begun preparations to engage; the Star Destroyer and the remaining two frigates had begun turning to face _Oberon_. "Detonate the nuke."

The Shiva, which had been thrown into a slingshot orbit towards the Imperial fleet, detonated in the middle of their formation almost on top of the Star Destroyer. Their shields flared and winked out. Summers knew that the Venator-Class Star Destroyer could transfer almost all its power to its shields to make a nearly impregnable barrier, but he had betâ€"correctlyâ€"that the Imperials would decide to transfer all that power to weapons instead so as to, in their words, "blast the Colonial scum". That meant that the Venator had barely any shields when the nuke hit. It was now almost totally disabled as a result. The Acclamators were still operational, but their shields were down.

"Hit the Star Destroyer with the MAC and all remaining missiles!" Summers shouted.

"Aye sir!" WEP replied. "Shots fired, missiles away!" The ship shook with each of the MAC's three shots, and the rest of the Longbows flew from their silos.

Summers turned to the OPS station. "Push the reactor to one-fifty for two minutes. I need all the speed we can get."

OPS paused for barely half a second. "Aye sir." The _Oberon _leaped forward.

At the same time, the three MAC rounds reached their target. They punched through the Venator's large dorsal flight deck, and one hit the main reactor. The resulting explosion split the Star Destroyer in half, with the larger halfâ€"the pointed prowâ€"spinning into one of the late vessel's remaining frigate escorts. The frigate couldn't endure the strain and exploded spectacularly. Here, the Longbow's superiority to its predecessor, the Archer missile, became apparent. Having recognized that their primary target had been destroyed, the Archers that hadn't struck the Star Destroyer searched for secondary targetsâ€"in this case, the last Acclamator II. The enemy frigate was ready; comp beams lanced into space, shooting down several missiles, while it launched a volley of proton torpedoes in response towards _Oberon_.

"Contact! Contact!" TAC shouted. "Enemy torpedoes incoming!"

"WEP, arm point defense cannons and power up the DEW guns."

"Aye sir! Point-defense and DEW guns online!" WEP replied.

"Target those torpedoes and fire at will."

"Firing, aye!"

The DEW guns rotated and fired deadly red laser beams through space. They didn't pause until all incoming torpedoes had been neutralized. The 50mm cannons didn't even have to fire. "Enemy torpedoes splashed," TAC reported. "DEW guns offline and recharging."

Summers got up; he had to see what was next. Oberon soared past the last frigate just as the remaining Longbows struck it. It listed to starboard towards Oberon, and for a split second Summers could have sworn he saw the dumbstruck faces of the enemy bridge crew. It was a picture-perfect moment. Shame I didn't bring a camera.

Back to business: "Arm the forward emergency thrusters. OPS, bring down reactor output to ninety percent." He ignored the chorus of 'Aye sir', waited as he counted off in his head, then barked: "Fire forward thrusters."

There was a bang, and the forward momentum of the Oberon was abruptly cut in half; Summers almost fell to the floor. He got up quickly. "Course correction, helm. Begin preparations for atmospheric entry. Plot a course towards Kachirho."

Whitcomb walked up to him, a wide smile on her face. "Sir, that was one for the history books. You went up against four Imperial ships and won."

"We went up against four Imperial ships," Summers corrected. "And I wouldn't celebrate just yet. We still have to extract NOBLE Team. Tell Sergeant Major Stacker to get his men ready."

Whitcomb nodded. "Aye, sir."

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Barriss could barely lift her head now. The effort she put into contacting the two others had almost drained her to the point where she didn't think she could stay conscious. It had been even harder to dull the Shadow Guard's powers. He had been unable to actively resist her, being occupied by the other two. But at least she could rest easy; she had felt his passing from the force.

The ray shield vanished.

Summoning all her remaining strength, she lifted her head and opened her eyes. A large figure in dark armor stood before her. "You alright, ma'am?" it said.

Daniel didn't get an answer; the woman had fainted. He ran up to her, making sure his recorders got a good look at her face and ran a picture past recognition software. He raised an eyebrow at the result that came up on his HUD:

**Barriss Offee. Jedi Knight. MIA, presumed KIA by GAR units of the 327th Star Corps on Felucia. **

"Huh," he said. "Guess it isn't just Spartans who don't die. NOBLE Two, give me a sit rep."

_"Boss, Two: The Imperials are about to make a second push. Don't think we can hold them off this time. Be advised, frigate _Oberon_ is in-system. We've been ordered to pull out."_

"Tell them we can't."

"I did, One. They're going to enter atmo and give us close air supportâ€| and they're going to knock down the Kachirho Tree."

"Can't imagine Rebel One's agreed to that."

"He wasn't happy about it, but he agrees that there's no other way, and it's a price he's willing to pay to get the Empire off his planet."

"ETA on _Oberon_'s arrival?"

"Twenty minutes, maybe less."

"Be advised, we've recovered a Jedi prisoner. She needs immediate medical attention. Textbook SERENITY FALLS situation."

Jun repressed a sigh. _"Copy."_

"Keep me posted." As Jun signed off, Daniel contacted Rosenda. "You got that, Three?"

_"Heard the whole thing, Boss," _she replied._ "Convenient, too. I had to kill all the bridge crew, and I'm locked out of the weapons station. Even the Master Key won't work on it. Makes you wish Alucard wasn't back in Sydney. I did make sure that her guns were inoperable."_

Daniel missed the AI, too, but didn't say so. "I'll need your help with the Jedi. It looks like they dragged the poor woman through Hell itself. We'll RV in Hangar Bay Four."

"Got it, Boss."

000

Sergeant Major Peter "Pete" Stacker was a veteran ODS. He had a CSV longer than most career soldiers. He'd fought during the bloodiest battles of Insurrection, the Covenant War and the Clone Wars. His men liked to joke that Stacker had actually died a long time ago and he'd forgotten about it. For Stacker, it wasn't far from the truth; every time someone under his command died, a part of him died with them. Therefore he took excellent care of his troopers, making sure they were prepared for everything possible and then some. He stood up for them whenever he felt he had to, which was why he wasn't an officerâ€"no big loss there, he felt.

Stacker and his team of ODSs were an anomaly among the fleet's

stealth group; the covert-ops boats were supposed to have a complement of Navy Commandos. But with personnel shortages becoming readily apparent, the gaps had to be filled. Since ODSs were the ones who had their black-ops role usurped by the commandos, they were the logical choice to fill the gap. Stacker was comfortable with that. He'd been there and done that before ONI had introduced the Spartans and the Commandos.

The Oberon carried a complement of sixteen ODSs, eight of whom had piled onto one of the three MD79-TCI Knight Hawk dropships, the Special Forces variant of the D-79-TCI Goshawk, itself a replacement of the venerable D-77H-TCI Pelican. The Knight Hawks were geared towards stealth, and as such had a radar-absorbent hull, harsh angles and flat surfaces to defeat enemy surveillance, as well as baffled thrusters to reduce noise, a significant problem in the extremely loud Pelican.

"Super-Two-Two, prepped to deploy," said Chief Warrant Officer Jane Winters, UNSC Navy. Usually, piloting a Knight Hawk was entrusted to no less than an O-2, at least a Navy Lieutenant or a Marine/Army Captain. Winters, however, was a prodigy. She had been training to fly on the Pelican—now used as trainer aircraft—when the Empire had invaded Harvest. One of the few Knight Hawk pilots had died during the attack, and she had volunteered to fly a Knight Hawk during the Battle of New Oslo, a Special Forces assault on Imperial Advanced Recon Commandos. Her piloting skills had impressed the Navy so much that she became a full-fledged Special Forces pilot afterwards.

Her co-pilot was Chief Warrant Officer (4) Daniel Schofield. Schofield and Winters had developed a strong bond that their commanding officers suspected was romantic. Their suspicions were, in fact, incorrect; they were wholly professional. Even though this didn't prevent the jibes from their fellow crewmen, they did not mind. Schofield was also the operator of the Knight Hawk's weapons, which included a recessed nose-mounted M365 Gatling gun and a rack of Anvil-IV anti-materiel missiles in an internal weapons bay. "Guns are good," he checked another console. "Missiles are good. Safeties on, weapons tight."

Crew Chief Ben Hatmaker put his head through the hatch separating the passenger/cargo bay from the cockpit. "Bay's sealed tight, Ma'am, and our Helljumpers have their seatbelts on just like Mama and Papa always told 'em to."

Winters craned her head to look behind her. All the ODSs were in their jump seats, restraints on and weapons stowed. SgtMaj. Stacker, readily identified by his red shoulder pauldron and hardened uplink module on his helmet, gave her a thumbs-up. "Good job, Ben. Strap yourself in."

"Aye, ma'am."

"Super-Two-Two, this is Oberon Flight Control. Opening bay doors now. Green light in thirty."_

The planet of Kashyyyk stretched out below them, a vast green expanse broken only by ocean. Somewhere down there, indicated by an orange NAV marker on Winters's VISR gear, was the Kachirho Tree.

The green light came on. _"Super-Two-Two, cleared for launch."_

Winters threw a lever, releasing the magnetic clamps keeping the Knight Hawk in place. The Hawk dropped into free fall for a moment, drawn by the planet's gravity, until Winters engaged the thrusters. The fall became a controlled descent through the atmosphere. "We've safely entered atmo," she reported five minutes later.

"I'm seeing a lot of SAM radar," Schofield reported. "They're all looking at _Oberon_."

"She'll be fine," Winters said dismissively. "You saw those DEW guns in action. Plus, she's got some of the best shield tech ONI could scrape up."

Schofield was unconvinced. "So long as there's no goddamn fighters. You hear about those new birds the Imps have started fielding? The ones that look like eyeballs attached to solar panels?"

"Yeah, the Imps call 'em TIE fighters."

"A friend of mine, he flies an F/A-32 for the Navy. He was telling me that a month ago, his squadron got jumped by a whole swarm of those goddamn eyeballs. Took most of his buddies out. Lucky for him, they don't seem to have shields or missiles, else he would've been royally fucked."

"There aren't any on Kashyyyk, else we would've flown into a cloud of them by now," Winters said. She looked at her screens. "Coming up on Kachirho. ETA: ten minutes."

"I'm picking up a lot of Imp aircraft," Schofield warned. "Drive signatures are consistent with LAAT-type gunships." He frowned. "Incoming transmission. ID tag is NOBLE One."

"Put it through."

"This is NOBLE One," said a voice on the other end. _"Standby for emergency code."_

"Standing by, NOBLE One," Winters replied, ignoring Schofield's look.

"SERENITY FALLS, I repeat, SERENITY FALLS."

Winters knew that code very well. Since Harvest, she had heard it three timesâ€| because she had extracted wounded Jedi three times. It had also been usedâ€"with alarming frequencyâ€"during the Clone Wars. "Copy, NOBLE One. We're inbound."

"Extract NOBLE Two first, Super Two-Two. Then pick us up in Hangar Bay Four, starboard side of the transport."

"Copy." She switched channels. "NOBLE Two, this is Super-Two-Two. We're inbound."

"Understood," NOBLE Two replied. _"Moving to primary exfil point."_

Daniel fired one last burst at a fleeing ICO. The rounds caught the unfortunate man in the back and he fell face-down, sliding to a stop just as the last echoes of gunfire faded. "Clear," he called.

Rosenda appeared, holding her SMG in one hand and the barely-conscious Jedi in the other. She set her down between a grounded hover-tram and a damaged cage. "Her vitals don't look good, Boss. If we're gonna save her, we have to get her out-system and onboard the Hopeful," she said, referring to the UNSC's massive hospital ship.

"Nothing we can do until evac arrives," Daniel said. He walked over to each of the blast doors, sealing the hangar bay from the rest of the ship. "That should hold 'em off for a while."

Rosenda walked over to the Jedi. "Barriss Offee, you said? What do the files say about her?"

"Nothing completely extraordinary," Daniel shrugged. "Commanded a unit from the GAR's 327th Star Corps during the Clone Wars, earned a reputation as a healer. Combat skills were above average for a Jedi. Intel thought she was KIA on Felucia during Order 66. A walker opened fire on her. Obviously, she survived." He grimaced at the extensive burn scars. "Barely. Her body wasn't recovered, so the GAR thought she was vaporized. We did, too."

"She must've healed enough to escape," Rosenda said. "But if the Empire caught her again, why imprison her? Why not just kill her? And why couldn't they make the capture public? It would be a heavy blow to the Rebel Alliance to see that on the net."

"Think about it: The Empire publicly proclaimed her death before. Declaring it again would mean admitting they failed to kill her earlier; they'd never do something to tarnish their reputation." He frowned. "And I don't think that black-armored asshole downstairs was always like that."

Barriss stirred. "Whereâ€| whoâ€|?" She tried to push herself up, but Daniel pushed her back down, albeit gently.

"Please stay calm, ma'am," he said. "We're UNSC Special Forces. You're in friendly hands."

"Are weâ€|" she looked around. "Well, I see we're still on the ship."

"Unfortunately, yes. But we have a dropship incoming. How do you feel?"

She smiled weakly. "Well enough to sit up." With Daniel's help, she propped herself up against the tram. "You are the legendary Spartans, yes?"

Daniel saw no reason not to tell her. "Yes ma'am."

"Thank you for saving me."

Rosenda brought her M250 up. "Don't thank us yet, ma'am." She turned to Daniel. "They're busting out the arc cutters, Boss."

"Damn," Daniel said. "I thought they'd take longer. How much you got?"

"Just the drum I've got loaded into this baby—two hundred SAW rounds—and two more clips for the M7. Got three more plasma grenades. Then the combat knife. That's pretty much it. You?"

"Two more mags, plus three for the pistol. Two grenades. Combat knife. Heh." He aimed at the far door, where sparks were flying from the edges. "This'll be fun." He switched to semi-auto, better to conserve the precious few rounds he had left.

The doors flew apart, revealing a whole group of stormtroopers instead of ICOs. They started firing as soon as they broke through. "Stormtroopers?" Rosenda said, even as she fired short bursts on their attackers. "Then the Imps must've broken through!"

"NOBLE Two, this is NOBLE One!" Daniel shouted over the COM. "What the hell is going on? Imp reinforcements are in the slave ship!"

"A group of stormtroopers bypassed our perimeter!" Jun replied. _"They sabotaged some of our E-Webs and snuck a group onto the ship!"_

"And I'm finding this out just now because...?"

_"Because _I_ just found out now!"_ The sharp crack of sniper rifle fire could be heard over the COM. _"We won't be able to push them back this time, Boss!"_ Another pause. _"I've got eyes on Super-Two-Two."_

"Get on that dropship as soon as she gets close! That's an order!" Daniel shouted.

"Understood, Boss. Two out."

"SAW's out!" Rosenda said, switching to her SMG. She tossed a plasma grenade. The Covenant ordnance fused with the armor of a stormtrooper, who panicked and ran into a group of his fellows. The explosion killed six Imperials.

Daniel was firing rounds as fast as he could without missing. Three stormtroopers went down from consecutive headshots, while four others clutched at their necks, their screams turning into bloody gurgles. Some required more than one shot, however, and he ran out of ammo quickly. "I'm out, switching weapons." The M6C/SOCOM was accurate and deadly, and it was a good backup to have. But he didn't have much ammo for it.

"Super-Two-Two's inbound. Keep your heads down, NOBLE. We're coming in hot."

With that as its only warning, the Knight Hawk soared into the hangar bay. The nose-mounted gun blazed away, cutting down Imperials like chaff. The dropship came to a hover just a few feet off the deck, and a squad of ODSTs piled out. "I'm Sergeant Major Stacker, sir," said the lead. "Come on, sir. We've got the Jedi onboard. Let's

move!"

The ODS'Ts continued putting fire on the Imperials and did not move from their positions until both Spartans were on board. Then they fell back in an orderly fashion. Once they were all on board CWO Schofield let loose a volley of Anvil-IV missiles. By the time the smoke cleared, Super-Two-Two was long gone.

When the Knight Hawk's bay was sealed, everything became abruptly silent. One ODS'T, a medic, was examining Barriss. "She's stable for now," he said, "but we should get her to a Fleet hospital, ASAP."

Jun walked up and shook Daniel's and Rosenda's hands. "Nice to see you two made it in one piece."

"Likewise," Daniel said. "But the mission was a failure."

"We saved a Jedi," Jun pointed out. "Not a bad way to end the day."

"Day's not over yet, sir," Stacker said.

Daniel could see the Oberon ahead, a large piece of shadow in the night sky. Then, the ship's prow flashed: a MAC round being fired. He turned to the rear viewport just in time to see the ferric-tungsten slug slam into the base of the Kachirho Tree. The ancient tree seemed like it shrugged off the hit, but then it slowly tilted, and finally with an almighty groan it fell, right on top of the slave ship. Explosions could be heard dully in the distance. "Damn," Rosenda said. "All that, and still we failed."

"I wouldn't say that, ma'am," Stacker said. "You're all still alive."

"Two hundred Wookiees dead, and we still have no friggin' idea where the goddamn Imps are taking them," Rosenda snarled. "It was a waste of good soldiers." She looked at the Jedi. "She'd better be worth it."

The Oberon encountered no further difficulties. Once Super-Two-Two had docked, the frigate had flown away from Kachirho at top speed, making sure to strafe the Imperial gunships as she passed. By the time the Empire had scrambled their fighters, the Oberon was already in vacuum, and it was long gone when the Imperial Navy finally sent a response fleet. That the response fleet, a large group of Venators, Acclamator IIs and three Imperator-Class Star Destroyers would have easily dealt with the Oberon was of little consolation to the infuriated Lord Vader.

The Oberon's first stop was the UNSC Hopeful, in orbit above Alderaan. Barriss Offee was checked into a secure ward, coincidentally in the same section of the vessel where, years before, first Jun and then Daniel and Rosenda had received the augmentations that were the final step in the SPARTAN-III Program. While the doctors discovered that the Jedi could, over time, heal many of her burn scars, many burns were too severe and scars remained. After a recovery period of almost four months, Barriss chose to remain aboard Hopeful and reprise the role of healer.

Oberon then travelled to Harvest to refit and resupply. There, RADM Miles Stanley waited to debrief NOBLE Team, and reunite them with NOBLE Actual Commander Julian Grey.

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3. Chapter 3

****_Chapter Three_****

****1400 hrs, October 28th, 2561 (Military Calendar)/
>ONI Alpha Base
Asgard, Harvest****

Commander Julian Grey had had several nicknames and codenames during his lengthy service in the Navy and the Office of Naval Intelligence. His first one had been "Snooty", courtesy of his comrades in Basic Training, intended as a tribute to his attitude. His first real codename had been Ghost, given just after his first mission as an operator in NAVSPECWAR, in reference to his seemingly supernatural ability to bypass enemy defenses entirely unnoticed. The next one had been Cipher, during his short-lived stint as a spy. His next one—his second-favorite—was ORION-019, the designation given to him as part of Project Orion, the predecessor to the SPARTAN Program. He still retained that, being one of the very few who chose to after Orion ended. The next one, NOBLE One, had been given to him in 2553, just after the Covenant War and the recovery of the only surviving member of the original NOBLE Team, Jun-A266. Then, following the Clone Wars and the outbreak of the Imperial War, he was promoted and given a new name and position: NOBLE Actual.

The position allowed him access to resources he usually had to beg from his superior and predecessor, Rear Admiral Miles Stanley. The downside was the inability to join NOBLE in the majority of their field missions; the younger Stanley viewed Grey as a valuable asset and did not wish to endanger him, treating him (in Grey's opinion) like a pampered child, an annoying thought for a grandfather (which Grey was, four times over).

This time, however, things would be different.

"Eager to go back into the field, Commander?"

Grey turned and saluted as RADM Stanley walked in, dropping the salute at the latter's silent return gesture. "Of course, sir. I am home in the field."

"I used to think so," the Admiral said. "Then I got—"

"Injured," Grey finished. He knew how, too; a lightsaber blade had removed his right leg just below the knee. What he didn't know was the circumstances behind the wound, and Stanley wasn't telling. "It happens, sir. But I'm not injured, sir."

"Clearly," Stanley said drily.

"My apologies, sir. That was inconsiderate."

"It's fine. And drop the 'sir'. We're not in front of the brass, and you're old enough to be my grandfather."

Grey decided not to mention that, as a member of the Admiralty, Stanley was part of the brass. "Very well. I may not be a Two or a Three Series, but I am a Spartan. I'm not helpless. I have demonstrated this multiple times."

"Which is why I have bent to your demands for a field assignment," Stanley replied. "The nature of this mission made it easier for me to make that decision."

Before Grey could ask, three Spartans in full armor walked in: NOBLE Team. His team. The leader saluted. "NOBLE Team, reporting as ordered."

"Be at ease," Stanley said. "Protocol is, for the moment, relaxed." He turned. "Alucard, you may come out now."

The familiar hologram flickered into life: Alucard, a fifth-generation "smart" AI. His chosen appearance, as usual, was classic Dracula a la Bela Lugosi. "It is good to be back with NOBLE," he said in a deep baritone. "Hopefully it will stay that way." He smiled as Stanley glared at him.

"I need not tell you," Stanley began, turning back to NOBLE Team, "that this is all highly classified. What you are about to see does not leave this room." He nodded at Alucard. The AI raised a hand, and an additional image appeared: a ring. "This is one of seven rings, called 'Halo' Installations. They were built over one-hundred-thousand years ago by a race called the Forerunners. I believe one of you has seen similar architecture before." He looked at Jun.

Jun nodded. "Beneath Sword Base, on Reach."

"These installations were key to a Forerunner plan to stop an extremely dangerous life-form called the Flood. You may have read the reports about the outbreak in Voi, during the Battle of Earth in 2552." He looked pleased as he received several nods. "As you know, the outbreak in Voi was ultimately halted, albeit at a price: the partial glassing of the area. It appears that the Flood was such a dangerous enemy that the Forerunners created the Halo Array to stop them."

Rosenda raised a hand. "Sir, how do they work?"

Stanley considered not telling them, then decided that it wouldn't hurt to let them know exactly what they were dealing with. "By wiping out all sentient life in the galaxy."

The Spartans looked stunned—"even the normally unflappable Grey's eyes had widened. "I guess there's a reason why there aren't any Forerunners left," Daniel said finally.

"The first installation, what we called Alpha Halo, was discovered by Spartan-One-One-Seven. He was forced to destroy the installation when Flood specimens imprisoned on the ring broke out of containment and began absorbing both UNSC and Covenant forces. The second one—"Delta Halo—"was discovered a few months later, with the Flood in control of it prior to our arrival. We destroyed it at the end of the war with a NOVA bomb. Later, we found another ring, what we called Zeta

Halo. We built a research facility there, the Anders Research Station.

"Five days ago, Anders Station went dark. We don't know why. Your mission is to find out."

"What UNSC personnel and assets are on Zeta Halo?" Grey asked.

"A team of six scientists led by Professor Lakshmi Alamanthara—who, for obvious reasons, goes by her first name—two four-man teams of Navy Commandos, designated Team Zero Six and Team Zero Seven, and a two-man sniper team, designated Team Zero Eight. Exo asset is just one frigate: UNSC Akron, Raven-Class, commanded by Lieutenant Commander Kaori Takamachi. There is also a battalion of ODSTs led by Lieutenant Colonel Paul Han, with some air and armor support. Han is the ranking officer on Zeta Halo, but the commandos are outside his authority and are lead by Commander Damian Blade. You are familiar with him, Julian?"

Grey's surprise did not diminish his memory. "Yes. ORION Two Nine. A fellow Spartan One point Oh."

"What do you remember about him?"

"Excellent Special Forces operator—like everyone else selected for ORION, of course—but he was a cut above the rest. Highly skilled. Highly dangerous. Ruthless. I believe his performance provided the inspiration for the SPARTAN Program—he was proof that a physically and mentally augmented super-soldier could be a force-multiplier—but he was not selected to be a trainer for it—much to his dismay. Not a total loss; he's not the type suited to teach."

"You didn't like him," Stanley said. It wasn't phrased as a question.

Grey shook his head. "In the field we were unstoppable, but some actions Blade took—we had our disagreements. I wasn't sad to see him leave my team." He raised an eyebrow. "I take it you had no idea about Anders Station until recently, given these questions."

Stanley suppressed a grimace. "Another one of Parangosky's pet projects. She took many of her secrets to the grave. My uncle has yet to discover several of the files that went missing when she died. This one, however, was discovered three years ago. I still don't know what goes on there," he admitted. "I do know, however, that a Halo installation is an extremely valuable and an inherently dangerous object. If we've lost contact with one, I want to know why."

"Consider it done, sir."

Daniel raised a hand. "Sir, given that SPARTAN-117 has extensive experience with Forerunner technology, why isn't he a part of this mission?"

"SPARTAN-117 and the rest of BLUE Team are currently operating in a theater too far away to recall. If you can find them, Professor Lakshmi and her team can answer any questions you have."

Daniel did not look satisfied with this answer, but didn't press the issue. "Understood, sir. We'll adapt."

Stanley nodded. He stepped closer to Grey. "Find out what you can, provided you don't attract unwanted attention from Blade and Professor Lakshmi. Colonel Han may be the ranking officer on Anders Station, but I suspect he's not running any part of the real show." He stepped back. "Good luck, Spartans. Dismissed."

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Once inside _Oberon_'s Armory Bâ€"set aside and refit for use by Spartansâ€"Daniel decided to voice his frustrations. "Sir, this is crazy," he said. "We're going in half-cocked, little to no intel and essentially blind."

"Please, we're essentially the same rank," Grey said. "Call me Julian."

"Hell no. And back to what I was saying before, I don't like this. They should send a probe, a scout, something before sending us to Zeta Halo. Contrary to popular belief, throwing Spartans at every problem doesn't solve them all."

"I'm with the Bossman on this one, sir," Rosenda said. "This is more like Ackerson's style. We are _not_ expendable assets."

"NOBLE isn't at full strength," Jun intoned. "Hasn't been since Reach fell. We need more Spartans."

"A single Spartan won the Covenant War and saved the galaxy from total annihilation," Grey reminded them.

"He's conveniently too far away," Daniel said. "I don't like this, sir."

"Neither do I," Grey said in the quiet tone that meant his temper was strained. "But we are problem-solvers. We _will_ improvise, adapt and overcome. And we will do what Spartans do best: Win."

"At any cost?" When Grey didn't answer, Daniel continued. "Whatever it is, we're behind you sir. One-hundred-ten percent. We trust _you_. Not _them_." He didn't have to say who "them" was.

"What's our loadout?" Jun asked. "Light, or heavy?"

Grey looked at Daniel, who answered for him. "Heavy. If there's a Flood outbreak, Covenant incursion or Imperial invasion, I want to blow the dog-shit out of it."

Grey retired as NOBLE began checking equipment. He had time to do soâ€"the journey to Zeta Halo was a weekâ€"so he went to his bunk, lay down, closed his eyes and remembered. Franklin Mendez. Nolan Byrne. Avery Johnson. Amanda Pierce. Robert Gordon. David Chang. Kinjirou Morisato. Sandra Kelly. Anna Kurilenko. Emmanuelle "Emma" Robespierre. All beloved brothers and sisters from the ORION Project. All variously dead, retired, missing or reassigned.

Then there was Damian Blade.

Many in ORION liked to joke that because of his name, Blade had very few career options in the military other than Special Forces. He seemed to be made for it. He'd been a top-tier practitioner of several styles of martial arts and an excellent shot even before his induction into Navy Special Warfare. His steely-blue eyes could strike fear into even the most intimidating of his comrades and enemies. He never showed fear—indeed, he never seemed to show much emotion, his harsh features seemingly etched in stone. He didn't play well with others, Grey remembered; he was a lone wolf. And he never, ever showed mercy.

It was that last attribute that Grey remembered most vividly, mostly because he had seen it in action firsthand more than fifty years ago during Operation: TANGLEWOOD, the last ORION operation. He still remembered everything as if it had been yesterday, the smell of smoke and death, he was used to. He could handle it. But not that one sight: a room full of bodies, and a blood-drenched Damian Blade in the center of it, a satisfied look in his eyes.

If Morisato hadn't been there to restrain him, Grey knew he would have killed Blade right there itself—or at least he would have tried to; this was the best soldier in the ORION Project, after all. Still, he regretted the lost chance ever since. Morisato, he remembered, was killed by an IED less than an hour later. Grey still visited the children he had left behind, and the grandchildren he would never see.

Grey shook his head, trying to clear his memories. There was no point in recollecting things that had happened more than half a century prior. This time, he promised himself, he would be ready. He would be ready to meet Damian Blade and confront his own demons.

Though, he thought to himself, if an opportunity arose, he would take it.

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**1534 hrs, November 6th, 2561 (Military Calendar)/
>UNSC <em>Oberon<em> (FFG/S-139)
>(CLASSIFIED—EYES ONLY: SYSTEM UNAVAILABLE), Zeta
Halo<strong>
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Jeremy Summers scowled at the screen. The word "classified" was repeated so many times, he'd already gotten sick of seeing it. Then there was all the black ink. There was so much redacted information; a good three-quarters of the files he'd received from ONI were useless. And he'd only gotten a tenth of the files he'd requested.

"Captain," said LCDR Lira Whitcomb, "We're within visual range of Zeta Halo."

Captain, he mouthed silently to himself, some of his irritation vanishing. He'd been promoted almost as soon as Oberon had docked at Harvest, courtesy of none other than Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood. The wife was happy, too; an increase in pay grade would go a long way to help provide for their year-old triplet girls. "Magnify."

The ring came into focus, a clearly artificial construct larger than

anything Summers had seen, human or otherwise, set neatly in the Lagrange point between a gas giant and its moon. "The ring has a diameter of ten thousand kilometers and a circumference of thirty-one thousand four-hundred-sixteen kilometers," Whitcomb reported. "We're detecting something else, too: some kind of artificial gravity field."

"Any transmissions?"

"None."

"Sir," said one of his officers, "I'm picking up something. It could be a distress beacon."

"Source?" Summers asked.

"Other side of the construct. Should be in visual range now." His eyes widened. "Damn."

Drifting sideways, trailing debris and smoke, what was left of UNSC Akron floated into view. "Set us up for silent running. Combat Alert: Alpha."

"Aye sir!" Whitcomb said. The bridge darkened, lit only by dim red lights. "We're running silent, sir. Reactor output trimmed to forty percent."

"Bring us in closer," Summers said. "Come on, people, give me something. That frigate didn't blow up by itself."

"Scan complete, sir. Damage is consistent with Imperial Navy turbolaser batteries."

"Imperial Navy?" Whitcomb repeated. "How do they know about Halo?"

"We'll figure that out later," Summers said, even though the same question was on his mind. "Find me that Imp ship."

The COM officer shook his head. "I'm not getting anything on the usual frequencies, sir."

"No engine noise, no trail, nothing," said another officer. He turned to Summers. "Could be another stealth boat, sir. Cloaked, maybe."

"Sir," said Whitcomb, "I recall that the Republic used stealth cruisers during the Clone Wars. They emitted a strong magnetic field, and a CIS admiral named Trench used that against them. What if they're masking that field's signature within the artificial gravity field generated by the ring?"

Summers was impressed. "Can you find it?"

"If only we had full access to the files on the Halo Array..."

Summers tapped the intercom, contacting Armory B. "NOBLE Actual, mind if we borrow Alucard?"

_ "Not at all, sir,"_ Grey replied.

Alucard appeared from a holotank next to Summers's command chair. "I am at your service, sir."

"I want all information you have on Halo's gravitational field."

"That information is classified, sir."

"Duly noted. Give it to me."

"Very well, sir." Alucard's eyes seemed to defocus. "I have it."

"Commander?" Summers turned to Whitcomb.

Whitcomb's eyes widened as she read the file. "Thisâ€¦ this is incredible, sir. The Forerunners were well beyond us, technologically."

"Focus, please."

"A-Aye, sir. Alucard, scan the ring's gravitational field and search for a distortion that matches the magnetic field generated by a standard Republic stealth cruiser."

The AI nodded. "Please stand by, as this may take some time." His hologram vanished.

"Sir," reported COM, "I've decoded the distress signal."

"Pipe it through to my station," Summers said. He tapped his screen.

The message began playing. _ "This is Lieutenant Commander Kaori Takamachi, Service Number 09982-17223, commanding officer UNSC Akron. On October 23rd, an Imperial stealth vessel of the same configuration as a Venator-Class vessel entered this system undetected and proceeded to engage us. We sustained heavy damage but we were able to evade and hide on the far side of the moon. That was ten days ago. In the meantime they have deployed a significant number of ground forces. We have not heard from them since. All attempts to contact the rest of the Colonies have failed due to the jammer aboard the enemy vessel, and our Slipspace drive is inoperable. To make things worse, the bastards have found us, and they're hunting us down._

_ "I'm taking the fight to them. We don't have much left, and we're on the verge of falling apart, but I'm not going to just sit here and wait for death. This may very well be my last transmission. Please tell my mother and father that I love them and that I died with honor. Akron Actual out."_

Summers resisted the urge to lower his head. He'd known LCDR Takamachi; they had been to Luna Academy together. To think he'd been eagerly waiting to tell her about her promotionâ€¦ The four bars and single star on either shoulder seemed worthless, now. "Any life-signs?"

"Bio-scanâ€¦" Whitcomb's shoulder's drooped slightly. "Shows nothing. No one's alive in there."

Summers sighed. "Well, at least we know we're up against a Venator." _Not that it helps_, he knew. Despite his victory at Kashyyyk, Summers knew that in a one-on-one fight with a Venator-Class Star Destroyer, he would lose, and lose badly. To top it off, he was forbidden from using nukes for fear of damaging the installation. It also gave him an idea as to what kind of opposition was waiting on the groundâ€¦ though that didn't seem to help, either. Venators typically carried a regiment's worth of troopersâ€¦around 2,304 troopersâ€¦at least forty gunships, twenty-four walkers and other assorted vehicles and munitions. But one of the greatest threats to him and other UNSC forces was the starfighter complement. The Venator carried more than four hundred fighters, bombers and interceptors. They clearly outmatched his four F-117 Katana interceptors and three F/A-32 Spatha fighters.

"Captain," Alucard said, reappearing at his side, "I have detected a magnetic signature that matches the configuration of a Venator-Class vessel. It is located about a hundred kilometers away from Anders Station."

"A hundred kilometers away?" Summers repeated. "Wonder why. Not that it matters. XO, tell NOBLE Team and the ODSs to get prepped for SOEIV drop. We'll be dropping them seven kilometers from the target area."

"Wouldn't that alert the Imperials?"

"Yes. I plan on doing just that."

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Daniel checked his carbine. It was in perfect condition. He stowed it inside the Single-Occupant-Exoatmospheric-Insertion-Vehicleâ€¦better known as a drop podâ€¦and settled himself into the pod's seat. An ODS fastened him in. "Try not to puke on the way down, Spartan," he chuckled.

"I'll take that under advisement," Daniel replied. The canopy came down and there was a slight hissing sound as the pod's seals activated. There were joysticks within reach of either hand, there to allow the passenger to maneuver the pod in case of anti-aircraft fire. In Daniel's personal experience, they were next to useless; a pod dropping through atmosphere was almost always going at teeth-rattling speeds, and thus had all the maneuverability of a brick shit-house. On either side of the pod's interior two small screens allowed video communication. Both of them were active now: NOBLE Actual and CPT Summers stared at him from the grainy screens. The Captain spoke first. _"That anomaly hasn't moved, so I'm assuming that the Imps don't know we're here, or if they do they're choosing not to go after us, for whatever reason. Either way, we'll be revealing ourselves once those pods deploy. Interference with our ground scanners means I can't tell you whether or not Imp ground troops are within or near the drop zone. Assume you're dropping into hostile territory."_

"Understood, sir," Grey replied. _"What about friendlies on the ground?"_

"I have no information on friendly ground forces in your area at this time. We'll try to contact Anders Station once you're on the ground, but in all likelihood they're under EMCON." That meant emission control; all unnecessary activities pertaining to communications and targeting systems were offline.

_"I sure as hell hope they don't try to shoot _us_ down," _Sergeant Major Pete Stacker said.

"Agreed," Grey said. _"Once all units make landfall, rally on me."_

"What about vehicles?" Daniel asked. "We can make a forced march, but I'd rather have some mobile firepower."

"If we can," Summers replied, _"we'll make another pass and drop a few 'Hogs. No guarantees, and the drop zone has to be clear first."_

"Understood, sir." This didn't satisfy him at all. A few of the pods didn't carry people, he knew; some carried food, munitions, and a plethora of other supplies, and there were six pods that carried one M274 Mongoose Ultra-Light ATV each. The Mongoose was hardly the mobile firepower he wanted, though. He'd seen the three Gauss Cannon-equipped Warthog LRVs in the _Oberon_'s vehicle bay, and he wanted them, along with the three regular 'Hogs.

"Troopers!" Stacker shouted. _"We're droppin' into hell! Let's kick some Imp ass! Oorah!"_

Three familiar beeps sounded. On the fourth, higher pitched beep, the pod fell free. The view was spectacular and surreal. The ground below seemed almost Earth-like, similar to tundra, yet there was no horizon; the landscape curved upwards barely beyond his line of sight. He saw something else, too. "NOBLE Actual, I'm seeing some kind of blue pulse laser firing periodically."

"I see it, too," Grey replied. _"It doesn't appear to be targeting us or the frigate."_

Grey seemed to be correct, Daniel saw. The laser was firing at a rate too slow for a weapon, and it seemed to be targeted at the other side of the ring. "Let's hope it stays that way."

Aside from the completely unconventional environment, the drop went exactly as planned. All the pods landed in a relatively close cluster, a mere ten to fifteen feet apart. "NOBLE is on the ground," Grey reported. His pod's canopy opened automatically. He stepped out, grabbed his carbine and brought it up in one fluid motion.

Rosenda's landing was not as smooth. Her pod's canopy didn't open; she kicked it, wrenching it from its frame, and yanked her M250 from its rack. "I hate these things," she muttered. Jun, emerging from his pod, nodded agreement.

"Second Platoon is on the ground," Stacker reported, jogging up with an assault rifle in his hands. "Thermal's clean; no hostiles detected. Doesn't mean there's nothing around, though," he added. He turned back to his men. "Get those ATVs unloaded, double time! First

Squad, set up a perimeter!"

Daniel called up a map of the area on his HUD. "ONI was nice enough to give us maps, so I can say that we're exactly seven kilometers from Anders Station." He zoomed in on the ONI facility. "Hmm. Doesn't look like there's a direct route there; it's surrounded by high walls."

"We'll get as close as we can, then approach on foot," Grey said. Sudden movement in the brush nearby caused everyone's weapons to go up. However, what emerged was not an Imperial stormtrooper; it wasn't even humanoid. "Hm. Fascinating," Grey said, lowering his carbine.

A vaguely dinosaur-like bipedal creature emerged, sporting five large thorns on its spine. It gazed balefully on the assembled humans, completely disregarding the many weapons still trained on it. It seemed to lose interest in them quickly; it turned away, stomping off slowly back into the brush. "That was weird," Rosenda said. "What the hell was that?"

"Some kind of indigenous creature, obviously," Grey replied. "I've seen them before. Brutes ate them as a delicacy. Perhaps they were more widespread than previously thought."

"I saw something on its neck," Jun said. "Some kind of collar."

"I saw it too," said an ODST. "We used them on Reach, back in the day. We put the bigger ones on the Guta that roamed around CASTLE Base so they wouldn't startle the sentries. They were tranqed first, though."

Daniel looked at Grey. "You know what that means."

Grey nodded. "It means that the troops at Anders range this far out. Perhaps we may find friendly troops sooner than we think."

"This soon enough for ya?" said another ODST, assault rifle leveled as he peered from the same brush that the animal had appeared from.

"Not my guys," Stacker said. He hadn't leveled his rifle, but he took up a wary stance.

Guys? Daniel wondered. Then he saw them.

They had been surrounded by at least twenty ODSTs. Each had leveled a weapon at Second Platoon and NOBLE Team. One appeared to have a HUL (Hardened Uplink Module) on his helmet, similar to Stacker and Daniel, and he sported a dark blue chest-plate. "I'm assuming you're UNSC and not Innies or Imps in UNSC gear, but just to be safe I need you to identify yourselves."

Stacker stepped forward, clearly incensed at being suspected of being an Insurrectionist, but Grey raised his hand. He depolarized his visor, revealing his eyes. "I'm Commander Julian Grey, Office of Naval Intelligence Section Three, and leader of NOBLE Team. These ODSTs are from Second Platoon, Bravo Company, One-Oh-Fifth Division—much like yourself and your comrades. We deployed from the frigate Oberon not minutes ago."

"ID number," the O DST said, clearly not impressed.

Grey's eyes narrowed. _Ah,_ Daniel thought. _He's gonna bring out the big guns._

"ORION-Oh-One-Niner."

"That's notâ€¦" the O DST trailed off, pressing a gloved hand to his ear. "Understood, sir," he said. He turned back to Grey. "ID confirmed. Stand down, everyone. Sorry about that. Can't be too careful, considering the situation." He extended a hand. "Second Lieutenant Jack Sullivan, Delta Company, Fourth Platoon."

Grey shook his hand. "Commander Julian Grey, NOBLE Actual. That's Lieutenant Commander Daniel B-170, NOBLE One; Chief Warrant Officer Jun A-266, NOBLE Two; and Warrant Officer Rosenda B-344, NOBLE Three. Over there is Sergeant Major Pete Stacker and his men." He looked around. "We should get moving; a gathering like this is sure to attract unwanted attention."

"Agreed," Sullivan said. He ordered his men into perimeter positions. "Thankfully, we control the air around our territoryâ€¦ for now. I'm calling in two Pelicans."

"Pelicans?" Rosenda said. "I thought they decommissioned those."

"Anders was built before they decommissioned the Pelis," Sullivan said. "It's hard to switch out for new equipment when your base doesn't officially exist. We'd just gotten those carbines you guys are packing about two weeks ago. That was why _Akron_ was here." He looked up. "Poor bastards. We saw them getting taken out. Been fighting the Imps without orbital support ever since. First time I ever saw them up close. We only ever heard about the war. Is it true that we're winning?"

"For the moment, yes," Grey said. "But we have limited time before the Empire strikes back. They have vast resources, and once they put those to work we won't have a chance."

Sullivan snorted. "Yeah, we've gotten a taste of those 'vast resources'. They haven't breached Anders's defenses yet; we've got that place locked down so tight even a moth won't get through. Once we run out of AA ordnance, though, it's gonna be a whole other story." He paused. "We lost Lieutenant Colonel Han, first day itself. He was leading a counter-attack and got ambushed. They slaughtered all of Alpha Company. Commander Blade's in charge now."

"Is he now," Grey said quietly.

A familiar roar permeated the air, and two D-77H-TCI Pelicans appeared overhead. "Let's get you on board. My guys will bring back your ATVs."

"_Oberon_ might drop a few 'Hogs," Stacker said, "so we'll stick around for them."

"I'll leave a few of my guys here with you," Sullivan said. Eight O DSTs joined their comrades, and the rest went on the Pelicans. As soon as they were on board, the Pelicans lifted off. They began

weaving back and forth, a tactic used to prevent missile lock.

"You said you lost a whole company?" Daniel said.

"Yeah," Sullivan replied. "They were ambushed and cut off from the rest of the counter-attack. We dropped the counter and went to rescue them, but by the time we fought through it was too late." He shook his head. "Those Imp bastards didn't spare anyone. Commander Blade's been putting us to work on beefing up our defenses, said it would be crazy to assault them if we didn't know what we were up against. So he put us ODSs on defense, and set the commandos to recon."

"Have the Imps tried attacking Anders?"

Sullivan gave a short laugh. "'Tried' is the keyword. Like I said, we got Anders locked down tight. We got Onager mass driver cannons to deal with that cruiser and AA guns and missile batteries to take out their aircraft. Our tanks control any route they could use to bring in armor, and finally there's us. We won't let what happened to Alpha happen to the rest of us. The Imps learned that the hard way. After that, there hasn't been any major assault, just skirmishes with our patrols. Lost two men yesterday, took out three of theirs. We usually try to break contact as soon as we engage; we don't want to lose too many guys."

"How's your ammo?" Rosenda asked.

"We've got plenty for our small arms. But we're running low on AA ordnance, and I don't know if we have enough Onager rounds to drive off the cruiser again."

A short while later, they landed in a small clearing. Waiting for them were several M831 transport Warthogs. "We're not flying there?" Jun asked.

"We could, but Commander Blade doesn't want all our birds to be in the same place," Sullivan said. "We've got six dropships. Two land here, two in another place, and the last two are at Anders. We'll be going by 'Hog from here."

They piled into the Warthogs, which set off at incredible speeds. "What's the situation with your COMs?" Daniel asked. "We were sent out here to investigate when you went offline."

Sullivan seemed taken aback. "Investigateâ€¦? But I thoughtâ€¦ You aren't our relief?" When Daniel shook his head, he sighed. "I guess it was too much to hope for. I didn't even know we were jammed. I guess that's why COMs with _Akron_ were so wonky."

"That's not good," Jun said. "How will we contact _Oberon_?"

"I said they were wonky. Doesn't mean you can't contact themâ€¦ every now and then. We know it has to be a mobile jammer, but we can't track the damned thing. Blade sometimes sends out our resident Spartan when he thinks its closeâ€¦"

"Hold on," Daniel interrupted. "'Resident Spartan'? There's a Spartan here?"

"Yeah," Sullivan said. "Lieutenant Carris-One-Three-Seven. She's one

hell of an assetâ€"nothing on us Helljumpers of course," he added quickly, "But she's saved our bacon more than once." He cocked his head quizzically. "You didn't know?" When no one answered, Sullivan shook his head. "Shit. Guess ONI really does like keeping secrets."

"You don't say," Rosenda muttered. She made a tiny hand signal to NOBLE. They immediately switched to a private COM channel. "There were a lot of us in Beta Company, but I don't remember any Carris."

"Neither do I," Daniel said. "Was she Alpha, Jun?"

Jun shook his head. "No. And I know all of the survivors from Alpha. I think."

"Then it is likely that she is a Two-Point-Oh," Grey said. He and other ORION operatives usually referred to other Spartans as either 2.0s or 3.0s, as they themselves were called 1.0s.

"I've only ever worked with one of the Two-Series directly," Jun said.

"Same," said Rosenda.

"I haven't," said Daniel.

"They were the first real super-soldiers the UNSC had," Grey said, ignoring the looks this remarkable pronouncement created. "ORION didn't have MJOLNIR Armor to outfit us with, and the one man who was chosen to test out the Mark Four armor got killed by it simply because he wasn't strong enough to control it. The Twos paved the way for you three."

"How?"

Grey hesitatedâ€"this _was_ classified info after allâ€"but his loyalty to his men trumped his loyalty to ONI. "Ackerson realized after a certain point that he couldn't destroy the SPARTAN Program. So he treated the Twos as proof-of-concept and decided to make budget versionsâ€"that is, you three, starting with Alpha Company."

"And Lieutenant Commander Kurt Ambrose was a Two-Series," Daniel remembered, referring to the head trainer of the S-III program. "He never said so, but we always knew."

"Jorge never really talked about the others," Jun said, remembering the sole member of the original NOBLE Team who wasn't a Spartan-III.

Aside from Jun, no one in the new NOBLE knew what to think of a Spartan-II. They were legends, not just because ONI's propaganda machine made them so but mostly because of their skills and courage. It helped that the most famous Spartan played a major role in saving Earth from both the Covenant and the Flood.

"Hey," Rosenda said, "no need to be nervous. They put on their armor same way we do."

The convoy passed a heavily armed checkpoint, surging by anti-armor

and anti-personnel defenses, and into what was "clearly" a tunnel of Forerunner make. "This tunnel is the only ground route to Anders," Sullivan explained. "We call it the Tube. It's been a godsend; Imp ground forces won't be able to get through without getting through it. Even if they make it past Checkpoint One, there's still Checkpoint Two which should be coming into view right now."

The tunnel opened up to reveal a vast chasm with high, vaulted ceilings. On the other side of the chasm was another tunnel, with more defenses set up. Grey could see ODSTs patrolling on the other side. But it was what he couldn't see that he noticed almost immediately. "How will we cross?" he asked. "There's no bridge."

"There will be," Sullivan said. He put a hand to his HUL. "Checkpoint Two, this is Bravo Four-Six. Activate the bridge."

A few seconds later, Grey felt his jaw drop slightly. Where there had been absolutely nothing before, there was now a bridge made, seemingly, of blue light. The entire place glowed. He looked closer: a series of some kind of emitter was right below the bridge, similar to holographic emitters used by the UNSC. "Solid light, is it?"

Sullivan nodded. "Yes sir. I still haven't gotten used to it. Whoever built this place was at least a thousand years ahead of the Covenant."

The convoy proceeded carefully across the bridge. How the Warthogs could maintain traction on it was something that Grey couldn't comprehend. However, it worked, and that suited him just fine. "This will come in handy if the Imperials attempt a ground assault," he said. "I assume that you can only open the bridge from this side?"

"Exactly," Sullivan said. "This whole place was built with defense in mind. You'll understand once we fully brief you on the Flood."

"We've read reports on the Flood, Lieutenant," Daniel replied. "We know what happened at Voi."

Sullivan shook his head. "No disrespect intended, but you won't understand shit unless you see it firsthand."

Daniel raised an eyebrow "in his experience, "no disrespect intended" almost always meant "kiss my ass", and this was no different" but ODSTs had always been that way. It was one of the things they were infamous for. And these ODSTs had probably dealt with the Flood firsthand. "We'll see," he said finally.

"Trust me when I say that you won't want to," Sullivan said. "Ah, here we are: Checkpoint Three, the final one."

Checkpoint Three made the others look like toll booths in comparison. A series of barriers, auto-turrets, Gauss cannon emplacements and countless other defenses made the checkpoint look more like a miniature fortress. Further back, Jun's eagle eyes saw triple-A weapons hidden underneath green camo tarp. Finally, dwarfing everything else, was what looked like half a pyramid, or a temple,

partially embedded into a cliff face. A long support beam ran from the ground to the top of the structure. "I assume that's Anders Station," he said. Aside from the clearly Forerunner architecture, he could see plenty of UNSC equipment: more weapon emplacements, machine gun nests, crates and a large communications dish at the top of the support beam.

"Yep," Sullivan said. "Like I said, everything here was built with defense in mind. It would take a whole lot of soldiers to storm this place. All we had to do was place our gear."

Evidence of extended activity was evident in the grass; the constant passage of both wheeled and tracked vehicles had created a dirt path right up to the temple. The convoy followed this path all the way up to the temple, and everyone dismounted. "What is this place?" Daniel asked.

"The eggheads could tell you more," Sullivan said, "but I think it was some sort of command center."

They walked up several ramps past patrolling ODSTs to the top landing where a large blast door was guarded by four more ODSTs. Sullivan walked up to one who was by a console. "Lieutenant, sir," he said by way of greeting. Neither bothered with salutes; the ring was now a combat zone, and no action that revealed a commanding officer was allowed. The ODST glanced at NOBLE Team. "More of them? Jesus."

"Open the doors, Corporal," Sullivan said. "The Commander will want to see these guys."

The corporal nodded. He tapped the console and the doors rumbled open. A long hallway was revealed. Sullivan led the way onwards, and NOBLE followed. The hallway ended at another door that opened to reveal a T-junction. Sullivan turned left without pause, and the Spartans followed him to yet another blast door. This one, however, was guarded by two Navy Commandos, both toting carbines. He turned around and faced Grey. "This is it. I can't go any further." He looked at one of the commandos. "Tell him they're here," he said. He walked back towards the entrance, but not before whispering, "Good luck," to Grey.

The commando that Sullivan addressed nodded at them. "This way," he added unnecessarily. He tapped the console next to him, and the last door opened.

The room beyond reminded Grey of the old zero-G combat simulators, almost like the inside of a giant sphere. The hallway transitioned to a catwalk encircling a large holographic projection. Even at this distance, Grey could see what it was showing: the ring and its natural neighbors, the large gas giant and the smaller moon. Surrounding the catwalk itself was a much larger, more detailed hologram of the ring. In front of the smaller hologram at ground level was a holographic console.

The room was not unoccupied.

Standing in front of the console were two people, a dark-haired woman in civilian clothing and a man in Navy BDUs. The woman had to be Professor Lakshmi Alamanthara; Grey's HUD identified her as such, and

the images given in the dossier matched. But Grey didn't need his HUD to identify the man. He instantly recognized him, even though the jet-black hair had largely become steel-gray and the face was more lined and creased than he remembered. Damian Blade was a hard man to forget.

Grey walked up to them, removing his helmet. "Damian," he said, surprised that he could say it so normally. What came next was even more surprising.

Blade broke into a wide grin, claspings Grey's hand in his. "Julian Grey!" he exclaimed. "Look at you! A little older than I rememberâ€"but that goes for all of us from back then, right? It's been a long time, eh?"

Not long enough, Grey wanted to say, but all he said was, "Indeed." He indicated the other Spartans. "This is NOBLE Team: Lieutenant Commander Daniel, NOBLE One; Chief Warrant Officer Jun and Warrant Officer Rosenda, Two and Three. We're here to investigate why Anders went dark."

"Isn't that obvious?" Professor Lakshmi said. "We were attacked."

"Clearly," Grey replied smoothly. "By the Empire, no less."

"You have experience with them?" Blade asked. When Grey nodded, he sighed. "We've been stuck on this godforsaken hula-hoop since '53. Heard plenty about the Clone Wars and the Imperial invasion, too. Never saw them up close until now. We always expected Covenant. Didn't know what to expect with these guys." He shook his head. "We learned the hard way that they're not Covies when they massacred Han and his men. Thankfully, I've had plenty of experience dealing with Innies, and these Imps are all human, so we adapted fast."

"How have you fared against them so far?"

"Aside from that disaster the first day and losing _Akron_, not badâ€"at least on the ground. They haven't gotten too close to us, and we don't give them a chance to take out too many of our people. Patrols have standing orders not to engage unless fired upon."

"And the commandos?"

Blade smiled. "I send 'em out now and then if the Imps get too curious. I have a sniper team out there right now, actuallyâ€"harassing one of their usual routes into our territory."

"What about their ship?" Daniel asked. "A Venator-Class Star Destroyer could wipe this place off the map if it wanted to."

"They want it intact, most likely," Blade replied. "Plus, _Akron_ went down fighting. That big sonuvabitch was trailing smoke after the battle, and they know from the aircraft they lost that we've got anti-air set up. That's probably one of the reasons they haven't gone after your ship eitherâ€"the _Oberon_, was it?â€"they're making repairs." He frowned. "I knew we were being jammed, and I wanted to get that jammer destroyed before they blew up an investigatory force like yours. But the thing appears to be mobile. Every time we think

we've got a fix, it moves. And it's well protected: our resident Spartan couldn't get within a mile of it without encountering mechanized units."

"Where is this Spartan?" Grey asked.

"Lieutenant Carris? Hold on." He whispered something over a COM, pressing one finger against his left ear. "She's coming."

Lakshmi stepped forward. "Do you think that theseâ€¦ Imperialsâ€¦ are here for my research?"

"Unlikely," Grey said. "Considering that I don't know what exactly your work here is."

Lakshmi looked at Blade, who nodded. "Put simply," she said, "I study the organism that is called the Flood. Specifically, I'm researching different ways to fight it."

"Bio-warfare. That makes you part of Section Three."

"Yes."

"I can see why the Empire would be interested," Grey said. "If they find out."

"They'd better not," said a new voice.

Everyone turned to face the newcomer. Daniel gaped a little: the unknown Spartan was wearing a suit of MJOLNIR armor that made his Mk V look like crap. It was slimmer than the Mk V and the Mk VI, yet was clearly more advanced. It was a dark green color, and the visor was dull gold. This had to be the famed-yet-little-talked-about MJOLNIR Mk VII, the peak of the MJOLNIR Powered Assault Armor program. "Lieutenant Carris-One-Three-Seven," she said. "You must be NOBLE Team. I've heard loads about you guys."

"From when?" Daniel asked.

"I wasn't always stuck on Halo, you know." She turned to Blade. "Any sign of that jammer, sir?"

"None," Blade said. "At least, not apart from the shitty signal quality."

Grey looked at the giant hologram of Halo. "Oberon detected a magnetic anomaly consistent with Imperial stealth ships a hundred kilometers from here. You suppose that the jammer would stay close to it?"

Blade nodded. "That's what I figured: every time we get close to it, it scuttles back to mommy." He cocked his head slightly. "You're not going after it, are you?"

"That's exactly what I plan to do," Grey said.

Blade shook his head. "The more things changeâ€¦ look, I'll concede that we have to get this thing out of the way before we can contact HIGHCOM, but we don't have the resources to risk that."

"That's why we're here," Daniel said. "This is what Spartans do. And now there's four of us."

"We have limited time," Grey added. "Imperial vessels don't have Engineer creatures like the Covenant do, but they are expedient in making repairs. We must contact HIGHCOM before that ship is fully operational, and to do that we must destroy the jammer."

"Lieutenant Carris is under my command," Blade said. "I won't allow you to risk her for another of your wild gambits, Jules."

"Sir," Carris said, "I volunteer for this mission."

"Denied," Blade said flatly. "It's suicide. It's a waste. We can hold out here."

"For how long?" Daniel asked. "_Oberon_'s going to stick around for as long as we need her to, but if the Imps call in reinforcementsâ€”if they haven't alreadyâ€”she won't stand a chance. Especially if they call in an Emperor-Class Star Destroyer, in which case we're all fucked."

Blade glared at Grey, and for a moment the latter could see the familiar look in his eyes: the cold, black stare that could intimidate almost anyone. "Fine," he said after what seemed like an eternity. "If she wants to commit suicide, that's her business. She's all yours."

Grey nodded. Daniel removed his helmet and extended his hand to Carris. "Welcome to NOBLE, Spartan. You're our new Number Four."

Carris also removed her helmet, revealing surprisingly attractive features and short auburn hairâ€”and a single white scar across the bridge of her nose. "A pleasure, sir."

Grey turned to Blade. "Have you managed to recover any Imperial equipment?"

Blade nodded. "Some stuff. Mostly weapons: blasters, grenades and the like. We have a couple of bodies."

"Show me."

"The Lieutenant can show you. I've got things to do." With that, he turned away, looking intently through his datapad. Carris motioned to them, indicating that they should follow her. They did, leaving the Control Room and walking down the hallway opposite of it.

Carris seemed apologetic. "Don't mind the Commander. He's under a lot of stress."

"An Imperial invasion can have that effect," Daniel said. He tried not to stare at Carris. There was so much he wanted to know about the S-IIs. Where were they trained? What were their augmentations like? Were they orphans like he was? Volunteers, like the One-series? "How long have you been here?" he finally asked.

"Not long," Carris said. "Maybe three weeks. Most boring post I've had."

"Must've gotten exciting after the Imps arrived," Rosenda said.

"A little," Carris acknowledged. "They've got nothing on the Covenant in terms of sheer ferocity, but they're not to be underestimated. Too bad it took a hundred dead ODSs to realize that."

"What kind of troops have you encountered so far?"

"Mostly stormies—the guys in white armor. A few regulars here and there. There are a few tangos I haven't seen before: guys in black armor. I heard about them during the Clone Wars; they called them shadow troopers. Almost like stealth Elites."

She led them into a large room. It appeared to be makeshift barracks for both ODSs and Navy Commandos, with a few areas partitioned off on the far wall. They followed her to one of the partitions, pushing past the curtains. It looked like a morgue area to Daniel. There were five tables, of which two were occupied by bodies. One was wearing the bone-white armor standard to Imperial stormtroopers. The other was wearing armor similar to his comrade, but it was clearly different. There were odd blue lights emanating from specific points on the armor, and the more Daniel looked, the less sure he was on the armor's actual color; he couldn't tell whether it was black or white. "Light-bending tech," he noted. He removed the helmet to reveal the familiar face underneath. "This guy's a Jango clone. Probably an original, and not the budget crap they started spewing out towards the end of the war."

Carris shrugged. "It doesn't matter to me; they're not nearly as sneaky as the Spec Ops Elites we used to tangle with, so a single one isn't a problem. But they were the ones responsible for ambushing Alpha Company. They move in at least squad-size formations, sometimes up to platoon strength. They also like to catch you in places where the lighting sucks, and because of their armor it's tough to get a bead on them."

"Playing to their strengths. Smart."

"Remarkably versatile as well," Grey added.

"It gets worse," Carris said grimly. "Whatever tech they're using, it doesn't show up on infrared like Stealth Elites do. The only way they know we're there is if they start shooting. I've gotten the drop on them a few times; they're not as quiet as Elites, and I can track them easier. The only good thing I can say is that there doesn't seem to be more than fifty or so, total. Less, now," she corrected herself, glancing at the body.

"Do they protect the jammer?"

Carris shook her head. "They're definitely not defensive units. Regular stormtroopers guard the jammer, supported by armor."

Grey nodded in satisfaction. "We go in heavy, then."

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****_Chapter Four_****

****1000 hrs, November 7****th****, 2561 (Military Calendar)/
>UN Building
New York, Earth****

It hadn't always been this way, UN Secretary-General Alice Dennison remembered. Once, well before the UNSC was formed, Earth's military forces were headquartered with their civilian overseers. The Argyre Planitia Campaign of 2160 changed that. As outlying human colonies became increasingly hard to control, the military viewed the civilian government as a liability in the struggle to maintain unity. Several officials had been known to be sympathetic to the rebels, and often hampered the military in their efforts to quell the uprisings. So the UNSC decided to move their headquarters from New York City all the way to Sydney. The symbolism of the move was not lost on anyone. During the Insurrectionâ€”and even more so during the Covenant Warâ€”the UNSC effectively ruled the colonies.

Things were different now. The Clone Wars had been fought largely under a civilian government, and up until now the Imperial War was no different. Still, UNSC HIGHCOM refused to move their headquarters back to New York. It wasn't hard to understand why; those with power seldom gave it up willingly, and the UNSC had never liked civilian oversight. It meant that if she, arguably the most powerful civilian in the Colonies, wanted to see High Command face-to-face, she had to fly from New York to Sydney. It was annoying, but like every other annoying thing she had come across in office, she had to deal with it.

The other annoying thing was dealing with the senators when she returned. One Senator in particular, Kenneth Hikowa. His daughter had been a crew member aboard the legendary Pillar of Autumn, and he used that in his campaigns so many times one would think he'd been aboard too. "I still don't see why dealing with the New Insurrection should be left to the local Guard forces," he insisted. "They're drawn from the locals. The locals can't be trusted. We learned that the hard way with the CMA."

"The Colonial Guard isn't like the CMA," Dennison explained for what felt like the millionth time. "They're under UNSC oversight, and ONI assures me that their screening process is thorough."

Senator Hikowa snorted. "You trust ONI?"

"I trust ONI to prevent another Insurrection like the one in '94. And I trust Admiral Stanley."

"Why?" Hikowa said obnoxiously. To the sides, the blank faces on the usually statue-like Diplomatic Security Group agents cracked slightly as they threw annoyed looks his way.

"Because Fleet Admiral Hood trusts him." That, she saw, rocked the belligerent Senator on his heels. Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood had been, for all intents and purposes, Dennison's predecessor as the Colonies' leader. He had led the Colonies through their darkest hours. To say he was held in high regard would have been an understatement. "In any case, the Colonial Guard and the Army will deal with the New Insurrection."

"If it gets off-worldâ€"

"The Colonial Guard forces and the Army will deal with it," she finished for him. "In case you haven't noticed, Senator, we're fighting a war here. My guess?" She folded her arms. "You're upset because your precious ODSs aren't getting enough anti-Insurrection action, and it's hurting the companies on your world. You know, the ones dealing with counter-insurgency technology." The flustered look on his face gave her all the answer she needed. "I love and respect the Navy as much as anyone else, Senator. And few have sacrificed more for the Colonies than the ODSs. But you might consider telling those companies and corporations to market their technology to the Army and the Guard instead of the Marines."

"They don't have enough funding," Hikowa muttered lamely.

"Then the prices should be lowered. I could have Fleet Admiral Hood contact themâ€|"

"That won't be necessary, Miss Secretary." After a few more minutes of small talk, Hikowa left.

Although anything would have been preferable to another minute of talk with Hikowa, the silence of her office was oppressive, even considering the presence of her security detail. As she walked over to her desk, holographic emitters winked on, projecting dozens of reports from all over the Colonies and beyond. One, she saw with distaste, was a letter from President Maria Esquivel of the Union of Independent Colonies, an autonomous group of systems once belonging to the UN. The letter urged her to cease the war against the Empire and allow her government to mediate a peace, insinuating throughout that the war was unjustly started by the UN. The Secretary-General tagged the letter with a memo and sent it to an official whose sole purpose was to write a reply to other heads of state that she didn't want to talk to. She trusted that the man would find a particularly flowery way to say "kiss my ass".

Another, tagged as a priority, was from Governor Raul Rojas of New Madrid. Rojas's home world had the dubious distinction of being the birthplace of the New Insurrection, and was the only world where the primary counter-insurgency forces were regular UNSC Army personnel instead of just the Guard. He was requesting permission to declare martial law to curb the protests and riots that were quickly closing in on the capital city. This was the third time he'd asked, and she'd denied him before. But with the war with the Empire going on, she couldn't go on without doing something. She decided to put it off until her Chief Advisor came in.

The major one she wanted to see was the report on the ongoing war. Surprisingly, while the invasion had slowed down, it wasn't due to an Imperial counter attack as much as it was due to a lack of manpower on the side of the Allies. The Imperials had countered, but only in strategic places and only to deny the Rebels new sources of soldiers and other personnelâ€| and, of course, to inflict enough casualties to make them think twice about another attempt. They could afford it. Even though the major shipyard at Fondor had fallen into Allied hands, the shipyards at Kuat were more than capable of providing vessels for the Empire's war effort. The Imperials had done everything short of a major counter attack only because continued Allied raids and interdiction efforts kept them on the defensive.

Bottom line, FADM Hood had written, the war was quickly becoming a stalemate and he had very low expectations on the UNSC's ability to maintain it. Something major had to happen to turn the tide. The attached report detailing casualties only reinforced that.

The most powerful person in the United Nations of Earth and Her Colonies had no idea what to do.

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0400 hrs, November 8**th****, 2561 (Military Calendar)/
>NOBLE Team
Imperial-Controlled Zone, Zeta Halo**

The five Spartans moved quickly and quietly as they could manage. They were on an alien construct, behind enemy lines, looking for a mobile jammer that was guarded by walkers, tanks and a whole lot of stormtroopers. They were outnumbered and outgunned, with little intel to boot.

It didn't get any better than this, Daniel thought with a grin. A mission tailored for Spartans.

Carris was on point. Since she knew the territory better than anybody else, she was the logical choice to lead the way. Somewhere on a higher elevation, Jun scanned the area with his sniper rifle providing overwatch. To his side, Rosenda clutched her SMG. The machine gun was slung across her back, with strict orders not to use the loud weapon unless the situation called for it. Behind Daniel, Grey watched the group's six-o'clock, making sure no Imperial snuck up on them. It was by no means a typical Spartan team. They ran the gamut from Spartan One to Spartan Three; Grey didn't even wear the MJOLNIR armor typically associated with Spartans. Yet they moved as one.

"NOBLE Two reporting," Jun said. _"Seeing increased activity. Imp patrols, regular stormtroopers."_

"Spot anybody that might be NCO or officer-type?" Daniel asked.

"Negative. All of them lack rank indicators."

"Copy. Keep me informed."

Another voice came over the COM. _"Anders to NOBLE, the sector ahead's dark to our sensors. You're nearing the jammer. Once you take it out, hustle to the primary EZ and contact us. Out."_

"You know," Rosenda said thoughtfully, "for a guy who acts like he doesn't care, Commander Blade's checking in pretty often."

"The dark zone will take care of that," Grey said.

Daniel resisted the urge to look at Grey. He'd caught some tension between him and Blade—"mostly on Grey's side"—but he'd never seen the man take anything personally. Whatever it was, it seemed to be an old, deep wound. Hopefully the old man would stay focused.

Carris came to a sudden halt, one fist raised up. The whole group froze. "You hear that?" she said.

Jun reported in a second later. _"Boss, I've got eyes on an Imperial hover-tank. 2-M series, big gun. Four stormtroopers riding on it. They're heading your way."_

"Get down," Daniel said. "Active camo, now!"

The Spartans went prone. All of them went nearly invisible as they turned their active camo on. The effect varied; Carris's cutting edge MJOLNIR Mk VII armor could barely be seen, while Grey's Recon/SPI armor's outline wouldn't have fooled anyone who looked closely. However, at night the effect was the same.

The hair on the back of Daniel's neck stood on end as the hover-tank passed by. The thing was smaller than a Scorpion tank, but it had a large gun capable of wrecking a Warthog in one shot. The stormtroopers riding on the tank scanned their sectors, but they failed to spot the Spartans. Daniel didn't move his head, but he could barely see one looking right above where he lay. After what seemed like an eternity, the tank continued on. The Spartans didn't budge until the low rumble of repulsor-lift engines faded away.

"Let's move," Daniel said, standing up.

Rosenda glanced in the direction the tank had gone. "If we're seeing armor, we have to be close."

"Agreed," Daniel said. "That's why NOBLE Four has an M6 laser."

It took Rosenda a few seconds to realize "NOBLE Four" was Carris. "Right."

"Let's keep moving. The sooner we take out that jammer, the sooner we'll get reinforcements."

"Sir," Jun said_, "we have to consider the possibility that Imperial reinforcements will arrive before the Navy gets here."_

Daniel smiled, knowing that no one could see that smile; it was mostly to reassure himself. "If that happens, we'll pull a One-One-Seven and blow up the ring."

"Great plan, El-Cee," Carris said. "But how will we get off Halo before we 'pull a One-One-Seven'?"

His smile vanished. "Still working on that," he grumped.

Jun's voice cut in, clearly urgent. _"Boss! Stormie squad, approaching at your twelve-o'clock."_

Eight stormtroopers appeared seemingly out of nowhere, walking in a single-file formation. They seemed relaxed, almost casual, and were apparently just as surprised to see NOBLE as NOBLE was to see them. For a fraction of a second that seemed to stretch out for an eternity, neither side moved. Then a stormtrooper's helmet shattered, cracked by a round fired from Jun's sniper rifle. Another stormtrooper's head exploded from a second armor-piercing round as he and his fellows raised their blaster rifles to return fire. By that

time, the rest of NOBLE had begun firing.

Within three seconds, they had lost the element of surprise. Red blaster bolts and FMJ rounds crisscrossed the night.

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**0430 hrs

>UNSC **_Oberon_**** (FFG/S-139)**

Captain Summers resisted the urge to drum his fingers on the armrest of his command seat. Any sign of nervousness could be immediately picked up by the crew, especially in a bridge as small as that of a frigate. A holographic image showed a visual feed from the ring below, focused on the star destroyer hovering over it. As the deceased Lieutenant Commander Takamachi reported, the vessel was almost exactly the same configuration as a Venator-Class vessel. Like most Imperial vessels, the star destroyer was no longer the red-and-white symbol of hope that it had been during the Clone Wars, but rather a dark gray that was more foreboding than anything else. Summers could see eight of the dozen or so powerful guns that gave the Venator its formidable firepower—no doubt the same guns that had destroyed the _Akron_. Oddly enough, he saw no fighters flying patrol.

The enemy commander couldn't know where he was. _Oberon_ was running silent, with her reactors running at less than forty percent. There were no running lights, and though the ship had no active camouflage it was hard to see the dark hull against the background of space. But dropping the recon unit had to have told the Imperials that _someone_ was here.

Summers tried to put himself in the Imperial commander's shoes. The Imps were probably just as much in the dark as the UNSC forces were, probably even more so considering this was likely their first time encountering something like Halo. Having encountered UNSC forces, the Imps knew that there had to be some kind of base on the ring. Based on what little information he'd gotten from NOBLE Team, the Imps knew the general location but hadn't nailed it down yet. The Imps knew they had the numerical advantage, and their morale was probably high following the complete destruction of that ODST company. Whether they knew that the ODST commander was among the dead or not was up for debate. But if the Imp commander was halfway competent, he would know that the UNSC forces knew the terrain better than they did. He would proceed with caution, saving his heaviest elements for the final push.

Whitcomb interrupted his thoughts. "Sir, we're detecting movement on the other side of the gas giant."

Summers leaned forward. "What kind of movement?"

"Multiple drive signatures, all consistent with Imperial vessels."

Summers scowled. "What types?"

"It looks like a standard Emperor Battle Group, sir."

The Empire loved symmetry and order, so Summers knew what an

Imperator Battle Group (known in shorthand as an IBG) consisted of. Centered on an Imperator-Class Star Destroyer, the IBG had two Venator-Class Star Destroyers as escorts for the larger vessel. Each Venator had two Acclamator II-Class Assault Ship escorts, and each assault ship had two of the new Tartan-Class Corvettes. That made for about fifteen vessels, not counting the thousand or more fighters and bombers that the capital ships could spew out. That didn't include the ground forces. An IBG had more than seventy-seven thousand soldiers, not including support troops and their armor.

In short, there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it.

"Are we still undetected?"

Whitcomb nodded. "Stealth systems are still running, sir."

"Can we contact the UNSC from here?" Summers asked.

"They'd detect us immediately," Whitcomb replied. "We could outrun them afterwards, but if that Imp commander knows his business he'll expect UNSC reinforcements."

"They'll set an ambush," Summers realized. "Or at least they'll take every precaution." He closed his eyes for a few moments. When he opened them again, he knew what to do. "XO, prep two encrypted burst communications: one for HIGHCOM and another for Anders Station. Detail the situation and then send it immediately."

Whitcomb's face was carefully blank. "Aye sir." She walked over to the COM station, tapped on the keyboard for a few minutes and then hit another button. "Encrypted transmission successfully sent" she said. She looked at the TAC screen. "Imperial ships moving on an intercept vector."

One of the Venators broke off from the formation, heading towards _Oberon_ with an Acclamator and a Tartan trailing behind it.

"Evasive maneuvers, but keep it simple," Summers ordered. "With luck, they'll lose us."

The Imperial fleet began disgorging what seemed to be endless lines of troops and fighters as the Venator and its escorts began hunting Summers. The _Oberon_, for its part, did what it did best. It faded silently into the darkness of space, effortlessly evading the large predators that wanted to blow it to pieces. But Summers knew that if something wasn't done soon, the Empire would claim one of the deadliest weapons ever built.

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2300hrs, November 8**th****, 2561 (Military Calendar)/
>UNSC HIGHCOM, Sydney
Earth, Sol System**

Fleet Admiral Lord Terrence Hood, fresh from the return trip from New York, sat down heavily at his desk. He was remembering what he had told Dennison hours before. His conclusion was only reinforced by the reports flooding his desk. If the Allies had any chance at winning the war, they had to do something major very soon before the tide turned. He knew what the Empire was like. Ifâ€"whenâ€"they pushed

back, they would push back hard. He didn't know how he would be able to stop them.

"Sir," said one of the "dumb" AIs that acted as one of his secretaries, "incoming message from Admiral Stanley."

"Senior or Junior, Meredith?" Hood asked tiredly.

"Senior, sir," Meredith answered in her cool, emotionless voice.

"Put it through to my desk terminal." No matter what the hour, he had to give time to the head of the Office of Naval Intelligence. At least he could trust Stanley to not waste his time.

The image of Vice Admiral Marcus Stanley filled the screen. _"Sir, my apologies for calling at such an ungodly hour."_

"Since it's an ungodly hour, Marcus," Hood said, lighting a Sweet William cigar, "drop the formalities. What do you need?"

Stanley looked nervous. _"Sir, I see that you've prepared a substantially large task force to reinforce the defenses at Fondor."_

Hood nodded. There had been rumblings of an imminent Imperial counterattack in that sector, with the shipyards at Fondor being the main target. "Why? Do you need it?"

"Yes, sir."

Hood blinked. "I was joking, Marcus."

"I wasn't, sir."

Hood pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. "I guess this explains why you're insisting on being formal. What's the situation?"

"We have reason to believe that the Empire may come into possession of a Halo installation."

Hood stuffed the rest of the cigar into an ashtray, leaning forward to give Stanley his undivided attention. "Explain."

_"We've had an installation on Zeta Halo since late 2553, Anders Station. It went offline on October 25__th__. We sent a stealth frigate, _Oberon_, and NOBLE Team to investigate. They discovered that an Imperial stealth cruiser had stumbled on the installation and destroyed another of our stealth frigates, the _Akron_. NOBLE Team landed and discovered that Imperial troops had landed on the ring, but despite inflicting severe casualties on the ODST force stationed there, the Imperials have not discovered the station itself._

_"We just received a transmissionâ€"sent at great riskâ€"from the _Oberon_. An Imperial fleet in a standard IBG formation has arrived at Zeta Halo. It will only be a matter of hours before the ring falls completely under their control."_

Hood leaned back, the impact of that statement hitting him

forcefully. If the Empire were to find out what Halo didâ€¦| "What about the _Oberon_? What's their status?"

"Current status unknown. They are most likely conducting evasion procedures."

"And NOBLE Team?"

"Unknown."

"What was the purpose of Anders Station?"

Stanley was visibly uncomfortable, an altogether rare sight. _"To study the Flood."_

"The Flood?!" Hood exclaimed, nearly leaping out of his chair. "Aw Christ, Marcus! You remember what we had to allow stopping the Voi infestation?"

"Yes, we let the Elites glass the area."

"And Delta Halo? We sent in a NOVA bomb. Destroyed the ring and the planet _and _its goddamn moon, for good measure."

"I know, sir."

Hood resisted the urge to slump. "Here's the thing, Marcus. I'm SACâ€”Supreme Allied Commander. I've got to look at the big picture. And the big picture says that we're spread dangerously thin. If that task force doesn't go to Fondor as scheduled, there's a good chance we'll lose the shipyards. If we lose the shipyards, the Rebels' chances at making a decisive push go down exponentially. If that happens, we'll lose what momentum we had and the Empire will gain the advantage. I know you want to retake Halo, but it would be safer to NOVA bomb the goddamn thing. I don't want to lose a war to save research on what we already know: Halo is dangerous."

"What of the people on it?"

"That's the problem, isn't it?" Hood stood up and looked outside his window. As the senior-most officer in the UNSC, he had the best office in High Command's vast complex. It came with an excellent view of Sydney's harborâ€”along with the iconic and historic Opera Houseâ€”and a view of the several hundred men and women in uniform going about their business. Everyone from E-2 to O-9 rank made the large base their home and place of business. It was the UNSC in miniature, a small fraction of the people Hood was responsible for. He would die for anyone of those soldiers, airmen, sailors and Marines, and he knew they would do the same for him. He couldn't let them down. "Consider Task Force One-Delta yours, Stanley. But let me make a few things clear. Your priority is to get our people off that ring. Regaining Halo is secondary. If, for whatever reason, you feel that you can't retake Halo without high casualties, you _will_ destroy it. If there is no way to get our people off, you _will_ destroy it. Understood?"

Stanley saluted. _"Yes, sir."_

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0200hrs, November 9**th****, 2561 (Military Calendar)/

>Imperial-Controlled Zone, Zeta Halo

"How are you on ammo and grenades?" Daniel asked.

Rosenda checked her belt. "I didn't use the two-fifty, so I'm good with that. Burned through half my M7 ammo; I've got two clips left for that. Two frags, one plasma. Good thing we decided to go in heavy. What about you, Boss?"

"Four mags for the carbine, three for the pistol. One frag, one block of C-12 that we would've used on the jammer."

Rosenda snorted. "Now it's a paperweight, since the Imps don't need it."

The attempt to find the jammer had resulted in disaster. After the initial firefight, NOBLE had attempted to continue on the mission but they were constantly waylaid by increasing amounts of Imperials, sometimes with armor. Carris had been forced to use up their heavy laser repelling a particularly vicious armor assault, only for the team to discover that the whole assault was a distraction from the real threat. There, in the early morning, the Spartans discovered how devious the Imperial shadow troopers really were.

Forced to disperse, the Imperials pressed their advantage and drove the team apart. Daniel and Rosenda had not heard from or seen the rest of NOBLE since the morning before, and they could not risk radio contact. But the worst was yet to come.

The Imperial reinforcements had arrived, and they were none too subtle about it. Brand-new TIE fighters screamed through the sky, and the imposing dagger-shaped profiles of Imperial capital ships were plainly visible above the ring's surface, day or night. At noon the day before, as Daniel and Rosenda scaled a large hill on the way back to Anders, they spotted All-Terrain Armored Transports stomping through the jungle. They, too, were heading to Anders. With the advantage firmly on their side, as well as the ability to intercept any outgoing messages from the UNSC ground forces, it seemed clear that the Empire would soon claim the ring.

"What do you think Commander Blade's going to do?"

Daniel thought on that as he used his combat knife to hack through the brush. "If he's smart, he'll get everyone to vanish into the environment and conduct guerrilla strikes. After destroying all the intel in the base, of course."

"And rigging it with enough booby traps to ruin anyone's day."

"That goes without saying." Daniel continued to cut a path, punctuating every other word with a swing. "Look, I can feel your frowny face. Say what you want to say."

Rosenda wondered how he knew, but put that aside for the moment. "What happened yesterday wasn't your fault, Boss."

Daniel swung a particularly vicious strike at a vine. "I was team leader. It's my job to make sure we don't get shafted. And we got

shafted real good. Hell," he said, throwing his hands up in frustration, "I have no fucking clue what happened to the others. I was so excited to be NOBLE One, I didn't realize I wasn't ready for it."

Rosenda shook her head. "None of us knew what those shadow troopers were capable of."

As NOBLE had fended off the Imperial armor assault, the shadow troopers had sneaked around the Spartans' flanks. Without warning, they used EMP grenades. The Spartans' MJOLNIR systems were briefly scrambled, and the shadow troopers had opened fire.

Carris had recovered almost instantly—her state-of-the-art Mark VII armor rebooted seconds after the initial attack—but found herself under sustained fire. She was forced to fall back, pursued by the shadow troopers, and barely managed to evade them.

The rest of NOBLE scattered after thermal grenades were thrown in their midst, and the shadow troopers drove them apart. Rosenda and Daniel had managed to stick together, but the relentless Imperials prevented them from linking up with the others. Their only option was to rendezvous at one of their preselected points, the nearest of which was the very landing zone that they had used to land on Zeta Halo in the first place.

"What do we do once we link up with the others?" Rosenda wondered aloud.

"Simple," Daniel said. "Restock on ammo, and bring the fight straight to those bastards."

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0326 hrs, November 9**th****, 2561 (Military Calendar)/

>Insurrection Camp 212, Iberia
New Madrid, Madrid System**

First Sergeant Ashley Granger crouched by a large boulder, along with the rest of the fifteen-soldier team, plus a guest from ONI. A UNSC Army Ranger, Granger had been fighting the New Insurrection since its inception in 2559. Her father and grandfather—ODST and CMA militia, respectively—were dismissive of the current iteration of the terrorist/rebel group; the New Insurrection had neither the scope nor the capabilities of the original movement, they said. In 2559, they would have been right.

Two years later, the new Insurrection had made frightening gains. As the UNSC pulled more and more assets off the planet to deal with what was being called the Imperial War, the insurgents took advantage of the reduced UN military presence to seize whole provinces, assassinate government officials and terrorize the capital city El Ciudad (literally The City) with frequent car bombings. Twice, the Governor of the planet had come under fire, narrowly escaping death at the cost of four or five of his security detail. New Madrid's Senator had refused to leave the relative safety of Earth, and so Governor Raul Rojas was the only UN leader willing to directly confront the New Insurrection. Part of his plan to crush the insurgents was to have the local Colonial Guard—including reserves—flood their forces into the most heavily affected areas,

while squeezing the UNSC Army to send some special forces to assist in targeting the insurgent leaders directly. So far, the Army had sent the 74th Ranger Regiment. It was a sign that the brass was indeed taking things seriously.

The 74th Ranger Regiment was formed, along with several other similar Army regiments under the 1st and 2nd Ranger Divisions in late 2557 as part of the UNSC's Special Forces restructuring program. Each regiment consisted of one Special Troops Battalion and three light infantry battalions with specialized skills that allowed them to perform airborne, air-assault and direct-action missions, among several others. With the formation of the Rangers, the Army finally had a counterpart to the Marine Corps' Orbital Drop Shock Troopers. Most Rangers were drawn from the Airborne and Air Assault units which were folded into the Rangers, so it eventually became a requirement for all Rangers to be Airborne Rangers, jump-wings proudly displayed on their Class A uniforms and BDUs.

Granger was from Alpha Company, 2nd Platoon. Her platoon leader, 1st Lieutenant Ronald Weber, was down with a broken ankle, making her team leader for this mission. ONI's field spooks had identified a cave in the region as a potential hiding spot for insurgent leader Miles Grady. While Grady was only one of several insurgent leaders, he was by far the most influential despite not being native to New Madrid. Without him, the movement would fracture. Grady had been in contact with known Imperial agents, and ONI suspected that the Empire was bankrolling the New Insurrectionists, or at least Grady's cell. They hadn't moved up to actually supplying weapons, else the UNSC and UNCG forces would have encountered blaster fire by now. Before that happened, ONI wanted Grady out of the picture. Alive would be fine, but they knew that realities on the ground changed like the wind. If the Rangers killed him, they would just try to capture another insurgent leader.

Granger didn't want that to happen. She wanted Grady alive, along with any potential Imperial agent. With Grady out of the picture, New Madrid had a fair chance of seeing peace within her lifetime. That made the mission worth it. And that was why she had no qualms about killing any Innies bastards or bitches that got in her way.

And there was the ONI minder along for the ride. That rankled, but the spook had not slowed them down. Evidently he'd also been Special Forces before he went off to play secret agent.

Granger peeked around the boulder. Outside a cave, two Innies sentries sat watch underneath a tarp and two floodlights. One, a boy no older than twenty, had an old MA3 rifle clutched in his hands, while the other, a young teen girl, had left an M392 Designated Marksman Rifle propped up against a crate within arm's reach. Both looked bored as hell; the girl was listening to music, headphones jammed into her ears, while the boy tried to get a good look down his comrade's blouse, trying and failing to do so subtly. Granger frowned. If these two kindergartners were standing guard, it was unlikely that Grady was inside. He would have put seasoned fighters up top. Unless this was the back door she looked at one of her men, Corporal Dayton Bradley, and nodded.

Bradley nodded back and crab-walked to another smaller boulder. The heavy rain muffled his movements, and the two sentries failed to notice the shadow moving thirty meters away. He leveled his own DMR,

a new M395 SOPMOD (Special Operations Peculiar Modification), at his target, centering the crosshairs on the boy's head. He clicked his COM once: Ready.

Granger put her sights on the girl's head. She was a little closer, at twenty-eight meters. She gave a signal to Bradley: Fire when ready.

Bradley waited till thunder crackled across the sky before he fired. The M395 SOPMOD had a suppressor, and the rifle's report could barely be heard above the rain, let alone the thunder. The boy's head—what was left of it—snapped back, and his body hit the mud with a _splat_.

The human eye is attracted to movement, especially in the dark, so it came as little surprise that the girl did notice her companion's sudden death despite her loud music. The impact of the event was slow to take hold, though, as Granger saw through her ACOG scope: the girl's eyes slowly went round and her mouth opened to utter a scream. Granger didn't give her that chance, sending a 6.8mm round center-mass. It would've been a headshot if she hadn't sat up suddenly, but dead was dead.

Granger's MA4A SOPMOD Carbine also had a suppressor, so no one other than the Rangers themselves knew that two people's lives had been suddenly snuffed out. As they approached the entrance to the cave, she paused to look at the girl. To her surprise, the insurgent was still alive. The teen fixed her eyes on Granger, trying to say something. Then the eyes glazed over and she stopped moving.

Granger supposed that she ought to feel guilty, but she didn't. It wasn't her fault that these two discarded their childhood to become terrorists. It was a shame, to be sure, but nothing to ruin a good night's rest. They had made the wrong decision, and that was that. _Tough shit_, she thought.

The Rangers divided themselves into three teams of five (not including the ONI agent, who stuck with Granger's team). One team would stay at the cave entrance with their heavy weapons: two M250 SAWs. Granger preferred the M739 light machine gun and its larger 7.62mm round, but the M250s were great equalizers nonetheless. Besides, one of the remaining three Rangers on the first team carried an MA37 assault rifle, and _that_ reliable workhorse of Army firearms still fired 7.62mm Full Metal Jacket rounds. The team leader turned off the floodlights, plunging them into darkness. The other team went to keep their primary means of exfiltration secured.

Granger turned on her helmet's VISR mode and peered into the cave. More often than not the Innies had closed-circuit cameras operating, but this cave seemed different. No security of any kind, not even tripwires. That struck her as odd, and more than a little disheartening. If this was a serious Innies base, then there should've been more security—unless it was just a trick? She mentally shook her head. It didn't matter. She was there to investigate the cave, and that was what she would do. More often than not these expeditions resulted in an empty hole and a bunch of pissed-off SF operators sitting on their thumbs, so she had already prepared herself for potential disappointment.

She stepped into the cave quietly, followed by nine Rangers. Her

boot-soles were flexible, designed to muffle footsteps, and they worked as advertised. The further they went, the more the cave seemed different: more regular angles, different texture. Clearly, this cave wasn't a natural formation, but Granger didn't recognize the architecture. The walls were of some metallic alloy, with strange grooves in the surfaces. Bits of the cave still peeked through here and there. Bright blue artificial lights soon forced the Rangers to turn off their VISR, and caution increased as they heard footsteps that were certainly not their own, as well as the sound of laughter.

"He tried to hide it, but he's always trying to look down her shirt," said one, an older male by the sound. "When she sits in a chair, he's hovering behind her. When she's standing, he tries to get somewhere above her. It's freaking hilarious. I can't believe I was ever that young."

"Does she know?" said another, a youngish-sounding man, and Granger automatically assigned them identities of Oldie and Youngie.

Oldie chuckled. "Of course she knows. She told me how annoying it was, even though he gets a good look at 'em every night. Horny little bastard. When he's not trying to eye-bang her, though, he's one of the best shots I've seen. Took out a Guardsman at five hundred meters, neat as you please, even with that shitty old MA3."

"Well," said Youngie, "if he can keep it in his pants, we'll make a soldier out of him yet. What about Sandy?"

"Oh, she looks like a typical teenager, but that scary little bitch slit a cop's throat once, did it without blinking. She took that DMR off him. Saved my life in the process, so I've got no complaints."

"OK, so let's relieve the psychopaths so they can get back to playing games or fucking."

"Why not both?" said Oldie, as he rounded the corner. The last thing he saw was the muzzle of Granger's carbine. He took two rounds to the chest and a third in the forehead, as did Youngie; he was dropped by PFC Maria Rodriguez, who was two steps behind Granger. They caught the bodies before they could fall on the hard surface, policing up their weapons. Granger took a look at them: both MA2B assault rifles, one of many still used by local police. Either they had been taken off dead cops or the Innies had help from inside the police. Both were real possibilities.

They moved further in, keeping an eye out for any more sentries or booby-traps. As they proceeded, it became clear that this wasn't human architecture. Alien tech, buried for who knows how long? Granger didn't know, but she had a feeling that the spook did. ONI didn't send out its precious field agents on random raids, after all.

Granger stopped in her tracks, bringing the whole group to a sudden halt. They all heard renewed chatter. As they moved on, taking short deliberate steps, the voices came clearer to their ears: "Not even one goddamned inch. How the hell did they open the other end in the first place?" said one, a woman.

"Not a clue, and Grady sure as hell ain't saying," said the second, a man.

"Then how the hell does he expect us to open it?" A third voice, also male, higher pitched.

"I don't think he does," said the first. "He had a group of guys trying for half a year once he found the place, but they gave up. Guess he thinks we might open it accidentally, like he did with the other two doors. Well, as long as it stays closed, our backdoor's shut."

"So, that's good news, right?" said the third. "UNSC won't hit us in the ass, then."

"You dumbass," growled the second. "He wants it open so he has an escape route. Without it, there's only two ways in and out of this base, and those two lead toward UN-controlled territory."

A sigh from the first: "And that's how it's gonna be for a while, 'cause I have no goddamn clue how to open it."

"Where the hell are the two kids?" asked the second.

"Who?"

"The fuck-buddies. That horny asshole and the scary chick. Davies and Clint went to relieve them fifteen minutes ago."

"Goodman, go check on them," said the first. "I swear to God, if they're having sex in the hallway again I'm gonna cut his balls off."

The spook sent a brief text message to Granger's HUD: _Goodman is inside agent. DO NOT KILL._

The young man known as Goodman had just rounded the corner, finding himself staring down the business ends of several guns. If Granger hadn't been told, she would have shot him. _Goddamn spooks_, she thought to herself as Goodman—“if that was his real name”—held his hands up.

The spook surprised her, making Goodman face the wall at gunpoint. He looked at her and said, "Kill the other two." Granger nodded, deciding to rip him a new orifice later. The two insurgents didn't have their weapons close by, and paid the consequences. The team checked every corner. There were no other insurgents.

It had been a little under twenty minutes since the first shot was fired, and six Insurrectionists were dead. Someone would miss them soon, which made their time here extremely limited. "Agent Perrin," Granger said, "with all due respect, you'd better hurry the fuck up."

Agent Doug Perrin made an impatient noise. "Later. Wally: God and the soldier all men adore—"

"—in times of war and not prior," Goodman answered in a clipped British accent.

Perrin relaxed and lowered his weapon. "Just had to make sure, Wally. Sergeant Granger, meet Walter North, our man inside Grady's cell. He's been in there for a little over a year." He gave a sly grin. "If he'd gotten the second part of the poem right, I would've shot him. He's the real deal."

"That's great and all," Granger said, "but we're running out of time."

"Yes, we are," said North, "but we've an unprecedented advantage. We can open this door, you see."

"Looks pretty damned closed to me," Rodriguez noted.

"That's because I've been delaying them," North said. "Surely you must have realized sending a single platoon of Rangers against a high-value target is unusual, to say the least."

Granger was caught off guard. "Iâ€"

"A company of Rangers with APCs, plus Colonial Guard tanks and infantry, are even now moving to strike this base," said Perrin. "Not to say your mission is any less important. In fact, the other assets are here only to make your task easier."

"Saving a spook," grumped Bradley. "What a fucking worthwhile mission."

"Wrong," North replied, unaffected by the implied insult. "You are here because there is evidenceâ€"hard evidenceâ€"of Imperial collaboration with the Insurrection. In fact, there is an Imperial agent here now." He allowed that explosive statement to sink in. "His name is Detrix Hol. This is what he looks like." He sent an image to their HUDs of a rather ordinary-looking man with dark hair and brown eyes.

"ONI is comfortable with Grady being dead or alive, so long as his body is in our custody at the end of this operation," Perrin said. "However, Hol is to be taken alive."

Rodriguez snorted. "Great. Like it's that easy."

"Don't worry," North said, removing his Insurrectionist colors, putting on a balaclava and strapping on a combat vest. "I'm going to take you in. I've spent most of my time getting to know this base's layout intimately. If I lead you wrong, I'll be just as dead as you." He picked up an MA4A. "I had to watch them take this weapon from one of your fallen comrades as theyâ€| desecrated his body. I couldn't do anything because it would have blown my cover. Now, I can rectify that lack of action."

Granger still wasn't completely convinced, but she was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. "Alright, then. Lead the way, Agent North."

North nodded. He moved to a rock face adjacent to the doors and used a combat knife to pry a large piece of rock away. Underneath was what appeared to be a panel of the same material the walls were made of, with a triangular piece of glass jutting from its surface. The ONI agent ran his left index finger along the edge, cutting his skin in

the process. The glass triangle suddenly glowed bright red, then orange.

Granger and the others brought her rifle up in an instant as the doors suddenly opened. "Damn," said Corporal Keichii "Shiny" Shinichiro. "Secret Agent Man was right."

"Naturally," North said. "I'll take point, if you don't mind. The assault should be starting any moment, so let's not stay here too long."

"Right," Granger said. "Rodriguez, Shiny, Bradley, stay here. Watch both entrances. Anybody you see who ain't UNSC or Guard, waste 'em. Hooah?"

"Hooah!" the Rangers responded.

"Shall we?" North said. Without preamble, he went in. "Oh, and while we're in enemy territory, call me Beagle and my colleague, Icepick."

"Got it. Icepick, watch our six," Granger said.

"Understood," Perrin/Icepick replied. The three moved in quietly, and as Perrin stepped over the threshold the earth seemed to shake. The UNSC and the Colonial Guard had begun their assault.

North seemed untroubled, despite the fact that the Insurrectionists were surely in crisis mode. He explained why as they proceeded further into the complex. "They know there's only two ways in or out that they know of, and both those entrances are now under UNSC assault. They don't know the backdoor is open. So they'll engage our boys with all they've got, leaving this base nice and clear."

"Great story, Beagle," Granger said. "But what about our target?"

"Hol will be holed in the Secret Room, along with Grady, until they receive the word that there's a possibility of escape. I myself have no idea what is in there, as my cover did not allow me to go anywhere near the place. But I know where it is."

It did not reassure Granger much, but there wasn't much she could do.

A few minutes later, North said, "We're almost there. Just down that hallway—damn! Get back!"

"What?"

North didn't reply immediately, merely looking around a corner. "Bugger. He's got his personal guard posted."

"How many tangos are we talking?"

"Seven," North replied. "Two have SAWs, M739s they picked off your Rangers."

"Let me take a look." Granger moved into North's place. Sure enough, seven men and woman were outside a large blast door, set up behind

barriers. "Those are shipping crates. Not strong enough to beat frags."

"Are you mad?" North hissed. "What if you break the damned control panel for the door?"

Granger was unconcerned. "Well, we'll know where the targets are and break our way in later."

"First Sergeant, I am ordering you not to do this!"

Granger grinned behind her reflective visor. "You can court-martial me later, then." Suck on that, you spook prick. She tossed the grenade at the guards, lobbing it over the barricades.

The M9 High-Explosive-Dual-Purpose Fragmentation Grenade has very few differences from its previous iterations stretching back hundreds of years. The current version was just as deadly if not more so, sending pits of shrapnel flying through the air to kill any who were not dead from the concussive blast alone. Despite his earlier protests, North fell back into step, moving in to eliminate any enemy still alive. The frag had done its work efficiently enough that Granger only heard two shots ring out. "Clear," North called out.

Granger and Perrin joined him, admiring the former's handiwork. "Not a bad throw, getting five of them at once," Perrin noted.

Granger shrugged. "It's an enclosed space. They didn't have much of a chance." She didn't look too long at the bodies, many ripped apart by shrapnel. The latest iteration of the M9 had been designed to go through the shields of an Elite Zealot. Unshielded enemies stood little chance against it. "Is the control panel broken?"

"No, thank Christ, it isn't," North said. "You almost cocked it all up, First Sergeant. But since it's working, I'm willing to set aside my anger." He nodded to either side of the blast doors. "Flash-bangs, then we storm them."

Granger and Perrin moved to their positions, and both took out a flash-bang grenade from their combat webbing. As soon as North opened the doors, the flash-bangs went in. They performed as their name suggested; the room beyond turned into a cacophony of noise and light for a split second. The three swiftly entered and subdued the four disoriented subjects inside. "Clear!"

"Clear!"

"Clear! Four targets secured." Perrin produced four flex-cuffs, binding their prisoners' hands and standing them against a wall. While he did that, Granger took the time to look around.

It was a truly marvelous room. In the center was a huge holographic display of the Milky Way, rendered in beautiful detail. It slowly rotated as it glowed brightly, mesmerizing the Ranger. She had never seen anything like it. "What is this place?" she asked, forgetting what she was here to do for a moment.

"Later," Perrin said brusquely. "Beagle, ID these guys."

North examined two of them, large men native to northern Iberia.

"Bodyguards. Not a priority."

"Right." Without further ado, Perrin drew his pistol—an M6C/SOCOM, the preferred sidearm of the UNSC Special Forces—and shot both bodyguards in the head. Granger thought to say something; What Perrin had just done went against the rules for treatment of detainees. But then she remembered the many friends killed, maimed and tortured by the Insurrection over the past two years, and decided not to say anything. She did not feel an ounce of pity for these traitors. Neither did the spooks, evidently.

North pointed at the shorter of the two remaining men, a stocky man with bright orange hair. "That's Grady."

Perrin frowned. "That's what he calls himself these days. Beagle, this fucker's one of us."

"What?"

The man who went by the name of Grady ventured a smile. "You arseholes always think you're smarter than you really are," he said in a heavy brogue.

North gave the face a closer examination. There was some modification, but there was something familiar. "My God, is that you? Ned?"

The man inclined his head mockingly. "Yes, Eamon O'Donnell, at your service."

Perrin gave him a look of pure contempt before kicking him in the abdomen, causing O'Donnell to double over in pain. "What about him?" he pointed at the dark-haired man next to the traitor. "Is that Hol?"

"Yes."

Perrin tilted the man's head back. "Detrix Hol. You are now in ONI custody. You may not say anything now, but you will. Soon."

Granger had tired of the spectacle. Clearly, these men were having some sort of insider spook-talk. While they had jabbered on, she had checked on her platoon (everyone reported in fine) and examined the display. She stepped closer, resting her left hand on a nearby pedestal.

The hologram abruptly changed at her touch, startling her. Rapidly, it zoomed in on a system she had never seen before. There was an impressive gas giant and its moons, one of which dwarfed the others; it looked almost Earth-size to her eyes, though she there was no way she could really tell. Between that moon and the gas giant, however, was an odd object: a ring. Above the ring, a symbol Granger had never seen before flashed red intermittently. "What is that?" she asked no one in particular. She was surprised to see that Perrin had been standing next to her.

North had also taken notice, and like his colleague had gone deathly pale under his balaclava. "Bloody fucking blood fuck," he swore, losing all sense of decorum. "Is that—"

"It is," Perrin said. "Fuck." He turned to O'Donnell. "What else did you tell them, Ned?"

O'Donnell grinned savagely. "Ask nicely."

Perrin strode over to him and struck the turncoat a hard kick between the legs, eliciting a howl. "No time for fucking around, Ned!"

"Really?" Ned moaned, still grinning despite the pain. "I've got all the time in the bloody galaxy."

Perrin sighed explosively. "Oh, fuck this." He put the M6 to O'Donnell's head and pulled the trigger. The traitor's brains—and half his head—splattered the wall behind him, and O'Donnell slumped over. Perrin then turned to the Imperial spy and pressed the hot barrel against his upper leg. The Imperial screamed in pain. "Your turn, friend. And believe me when I say that if you fuck with me, you won't get the mercy of a quick death like these other guys. Now: what else did he tell you?"

Granger watched the whole spectacle with her mouth slightly open. She had worked with ONI field agents before, but had never, ever seen one lose control. What was it about that ring-object that had him so angry? No, she suddenly realized. Perrin wasn't angry so much as he was afraid. For some reason, that made her afraid as well.

Hol wasn't a trained field agent, despite ONI's intelligence to the contrary. In fact, he was a scientist, and very much out of his depth. The sight of the men he'd lived with for almost a month now dead on the floor shocked him in a way he hadn't expected. Nor had he expected torture. Before Perrin could do anything else, Hol nearly screamed: "Flood! We were looking for something called the Flood!"

Perrin was silent for what seemed like a long time. When he spoke, his voice was almost a whisper. "Flood. Are you sure?"

"Yes, yes! Please don't hurt me," he sobbed.

"What unit are you?" Perrin could now see for himself that Hol wasn't a spy.

"Imperial Bio-Weapons division."

And that was something even Granger could understand. "You're making bio-weapons?"

Hol nodded.

Perrin was standing up now, clearly agitated. "You fucking lunatics. You have no idea what you're dealing with. I was at Voi, goddamnit, I saw—"

"Icepick," North said loudly, "shut up." He looked pointedly at Granger, who understood immediately: she had just heard a few tidbits of need-to-know. North continued, directing his comments at Granger. "First Sergeant, everything you've seen and heard here is classified. You are to speak of it to no one. Not your soldiers, not your CO, not your lover, not even yourself. Is that clear?"

"Crystal," Granger replied, pissed at the man's attitude. "I'm a Ranger, remember? I know the song and dance."

Perrin was shaking his head slowly. "Beagle, we have to tell him."

North nodded. "Bloody hell. Marcus isn't going to like this."

"That's putting it mildly."

"Pardon me for asking," Granger said, "butâ€”without divulging classified informationâ€”how big is this?"

North raised one eyebrow. "If we don't get it sorted quickly, we're _all_ buggered."

Granger shrugged. She still barely understood, and doubted she ever would. Besides, her job here was basically done now; all that was left was to take the prisoner back to Fort Bolivar.

She could be forgiven for such thoughts. No one in her position could have expected what came next.

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**ALPHA Priority Channel: To HIGHCOM from FFG/S-139
****_Oberon_****/**/triple-encryption time-stamped eyes-only: white
whale white whale
>start file/
><strong>IMMEDIATE ACTION REQUIRED<br>Item: **Imperial IBG-Class
battle group moving to occupy Zeta Halo. Current UNSC assets
insufficient to deal with threat.
><strong>Item: <strong>IBG flagship identified via intercepts as ISD
_Vector_, Emperor-Class. _Vector_ has been previously confirmed to
house Bio-Weapon R&D facilities.
><strong>Item: <strong>ONI Research Facility Anders Station contains
significant amount of research on the Flood parasite.

><strong>Conclusion: <strong>Imperial forces will soon seize Zeta
Halo in its entirety.
><strong>Conclusion: SIGNIFICANT RADIOLOGICAL ENERGY WMD THREAT.
EMERGENCY CODE ****_BANDERSNATCH_**** NOW IN EFFECT.**

><strong>Conclusion: SIGNIFICANT BIOLOGICAL WMD THREAT. EMERGENCY
CODE <strong>**_HYDRA_**** NOW IN EFFECT.
>IMMEDIATE ACTION REQUIRED<br>**/end file/
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5. Chapter 5

Chapter Five

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**0600 hrs, November 10****th****, 2561 (Military Calendar)/
>UNSC <strong>**_Texas_**** (BB-04), Task Force One-Delta, Home Fleet

>Reach, Epsilon Eridani System<strong>
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The Texas was one of eight battleships in the UNSC Navy. Each one was a powerful force by itself, but the Texas was unique. Iowa-Class battleships were supposed to have two 600 ton MAC guns and one 1200 ton main MAC gun as their primary armaments. Instead of the "twelve-hundred" gun, as it was called in the fleet, Texas had Mk7 DEW, the largest directed energy weapon in the entire UNSC. Powerful enough to destroy a Covenant supercarrier in one hit, it made Texas the deadliest vessel in the UNSC Navy. It was originally intended to be a technology demonstratorâ€”Texas had actually been an unfinished battleship, destined for the scrap yard before ONI took custody of it to test the Mk7â€”but Fleet Admiral Hood had it pressed into service. That meant making sure it was up to standard for an Iowa-Class battleship, including the two 600 ton MACs and the plethora of cannon batteries, point-defense weapons and missiles. Half of the point-defense guns were Mk2 DEW guns like the ones on Oberon and ran off their own generator, as did the Mk7. Space once meant for fighter bays was reallocated for the large generators, meaning that the Texas didn't have her own fighter squadron. She could never operate on her own; at all times, she was to be accompanied by a cruiser, at the very least.

VADM Marcus Stanley admired the vessel, but could not claim it as his flagship. One of the conditions Hood had set for giving him access to TFLD was that the task force's commander, VADM Sergey Vatutin, would remain in command. Stanley's role was to read him in (that is, allow him access to the need-to-know information) and point the way.

Vatutin had asked Stanleyâ€”politely, which surprised the chief of ONIâ€”to stay in his cabin while he checked on the status of the fleet, leaving Stanley alone with his thoughts. He wished that he had something to distract him, but the news from New Madrid was too important to ignore. Eamon O'Donnell. The man had been an above-average field officer, and the New Madrid branch had him infiltrate the Insurrection with Stanley's blessing. All of a sudden, he had vanished. It was not unusual given the nature of his mission, so no one knew that O'Donnell had gone from merely posing as an Insurrectionist to actually being one. He had displayed talents that had gotten noticed in Section One, and so he had transferred there. What was worse was O'Donnell's knowledge of Forerunner technology. One of the many ONI agents sent to the wrecked Ark Installation as well as Zeta Halo, O'Donnell had evidently also discovered what ONI was now calling the Prime Cartographer, a map of the galaxy markingâ€”among other thingsâ€”the locations of the five remaining Halo installations.

And he had willingly given Zeta Halo's location to the Empire.

Why? Stanley asked himself. There was nothing in O'Donnell's background that suggested he would betray the UN. Why would he give information on the Flood to an enemy who would be only too willing to try and harness it? They would likely never know the answer, thanks to Agent Perrin. Stanley couldn't fault the manâ€”Perrin had seen firsthand what the Flood had done to the UNSC forces at Voiâ€”but had advised his senior to remove him from the field temporarily.

In the end, why no longer mattered. The deed had been done, and now Stanley had to deal with the aftermath. He had to find out if the

other deep-cover agents were still loyal (not an easy task), and he had to find out what else the Imperials knew about Forerunner technology. With O'Donnell dead, there was no knowing exactly how much had been compromised. The only thing to do was assume that everything that O'Donnell once had access to was now known to the Empire.

Vatutin entered the cabin after a knock. Without preamble, he sat in his chair and sighed heavily. "And off we go to fight again, da?" He reached into one of the drawers in his desk and pulled out what Stanley immediately recognized as a bottle of vodka. "Would you like some, Vice Admiral?"

"No, thank you," Stanley replied. "And you can call me Marcus."

Vatutin grinned. "And you can call me Sergey." He waited for Stanley to say something, but when Stanley refused to break the silence he continued instead. "It is odd for the chief of ONI to personally request an entire fleet for one endeavor. It is even stranger for him to accompany this fleet. Therefore, thisâ€| errand of yours must be an extremely vital one."

"It is, most certainly."

"Worth more than your safety?"

Stanley looked at him evenly. "It's worth more than my life. It's worth trillions of lives, and that's how many will be lost if we fail."

Vatutin raised an eyebrow. He leaned back in his chair, muttering something in Russian. "I've told my people that there is a change in plans. They know that we're not going to Fondor, and they know that we're to expect at the very least an IBG. That's all they know, because that's all I know." He poured himself some vodka in a shot-glass and downed it in one gulp, smacking his lips. "Ah, I do love the taste of the old country. But, tell me, Marcus: what is our mission?"

Stanley was silent only a moment. He had already decided what to tell Vatutin an hour ago. "Sergey, many years ago ONI took possession of an ancient alien artifact, a ring-shaped construct we call Halo. It was built by the Forerunners, a race that the Covenant worshiped as gods. In conjunction with six other rings, the Halo installations have enough power to wipe the galaxy clean of all sentient life."

Vatutin was visibly shocked. He poured more vodka, downing this glass in one gulp as well. "Why would anyone want to do that?"

"It was a last resort weapon. The Forerunners were fighting a particularly virulent parasitic life-form called the Flood. They were losing badly, so they triggered the rings. That was one-hundred thousand years ago."

Vatutin was silent a long time. "I think there is more to theseâ€| Forerunners."

"It would take me a year to try and fully explain everything we

know." Which wasn't exactly true, but Stanley didn't want to tell him everything.

"However, what do these Halos have to do with our new mission?"

"An Imperial force is on the ring, IBG-strength. The assets we have are vastly outmatched."

Vatutin nodded, understanding. "Hence the need for my task force."

"Yes."

Vatutin shook his head. "One-Delta is equipped to conduct a fleet action, but not a ground war. I can drive off that IBG, but it will not mean anything unless we have boots on the ground."

"What do we have?"

"ODSTs, to fend off boarding parties and to conduct some boarding of their own if need be. A few light vehicles. Not enough to fight an entrenched enemy."

Stanley sighed. "That is a problem."

"Very big problem, yes, when considering the other side has seventy-seven thousand soldiers, at the very least. Not to mention armor, support, so on."

"Marines?"

Vatutin shook his head. "Most are deployed to the front, and the divisions in Colonial space aren't conveniently close enough for the time we have." He suddenly snapped his fingers, as if an idea had popped into his head. "Ah! We can call on the Army."

"The Army?" Stanley repeated. "Are they even capable of something like this?"

"It shouldn't be too different. The ODSTs deploy as usual, secure a landing zone. Army Airborne/Air Assault rides in on Goshawks to reinforce them, engineers deploy right behind the Airborne and set up a base— you can see where I'm going."

Stanley gave a tired smile. "And where are we going to get all those Army units?"

"New Madrid."

"The colony currently undergoing an insurgency so violent the primary counter-insurgency forces there are regular UNSC instead of UNCG. How would we get anything from there?"

Vatutin laughed. "You only saw the bad news, didn't you?"

It had somehow leaked that one of the top Insurrectionists had been an ONI traitor. Stanley still had several enemies within his own organization, he remembered, and he made a note to find out who was leaking and ruin their lives completely. "A high-ranking agent

defected to the Insurrection. Of course that has occupied my mind."

Vatutin brought out a datapad with a flourish. "Well, since your people killed the stukach, the Insurrection has been heavily hit. The Guard got enough intel to wipe out several insurgent camps. It's probably too early to say, but I believe the end of the Insurrection is imminent."

Stanley stood up. "Sergey, I believe we need to have a face-to-face meeting with New Madrid CENTCOM."

"Oh? When?"

"Now."

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0825 hrs, November 10**th****, 2561 (Military Calendar)/

>Contested Zone, Zeta Halo

Jun scanned the valley below. It was beautiful, even more so than the Longhorn Valley on Reach. A river ran its length, flowing from its source in the hills. Jun had posted himself on the largest of these hills, as it gave him an excellent view of the Imperials' most likely approach. It was also a possibility that he would even see someone from NOBLE. But for now, he was alone.

Daniel's advice to go in heavy had been good. He still had plenty of ammo for his sniper rifle, with differing varieties of ammunition. The possibilities are endless, he thought with a grim smile. It was his first jovial thought since the shadow trooper ambush.

Something caught his eye, and he slowly moved his scope to scan the area. There was a bend in the river, shadowed by a large tree. It was a shallow point; Jun had used it himself to cross the flowing water, though he had first carefully removed his boot-prints from the river silt. Had someone else just attempt to cross the same point? He moved the scope slightly.

Nothing.

Jun suppressed his frustrations. There was nothing to be gained by being angry. It would throw off his accuracy, and he needed to be operating at one-hundred percent. Patiently, he moved the scope pack and forth, looking for whatever it was that had caught his attention. It was on his third pass that he saw it.

The water seemed to be flowing around one or two objects in the middle of the shallow crossing. Zooming in, he saw the faint but familiar outline. It was a shadow trooper, almost waist deep in the river, and his armor's active camo system was having trouble compensating for both the water and the glittering sunlight reflected off its surface. He zoomed out and spotted two other ghostly shapes on the other side of the river. There had to be more, he knew. That he had noticed their movements just under two miles away would be astonishing for anybody else, but not for Jun. He was a Spartan, one of the best snipers in the UNSC, and he had his pursuers in his sights.

"Persistent bastards," he said to no one in particular. He debated firing on the shadow troopers. It was unlikely that they would pin down his position after the first shot, and being two miles away wouldn't help them. Two shots without detection were doable. A third shot would be pushing it. Two shots it is. He knew without having to check that he was loaded with 14.5x114mm Armor Piercing Fin Stabilized Discarding Sabot rounds, and he worked the SRS99 AM Sniper Rifle's action, chambering a round.

The barely discernible shape of the first shadow trooper was three quarters of the way across the river. A second was in the middle of the river. Jun settled his crosshairs on the first trooper, breathed out slowly, and pulled the trigger.

The sabot hit the shadow trooper center-mass, punching through the chest-piece and perforating his heart. He sank to his knees just as Jun fired his second shot, taking the second trooper in the helmet. The kinetic energy turned that target's brain into a gooey mess, and he flopped into the river unceremoniously just as the crack of the first round reached his comrades' ears. The third shadow trooper dove to the ground behind the tree.

Two seconds, two shots, two kills. Not bad, Jun thought to himself as he low-crawled away. He didn't think that the remaining Imps had pinpointed his sniper's nest, but he hadn't survived the fall of Reach and the Clone Wars by being careless.

Ten minutes later, his caution was justified. A familiar warble from the distance grew louder and louder until he could see the Multi Altitude Assault Transport flying through the air. The MAAT was an upgrade of the LAAT, taking some design inspirations from the ARC-170 fighter/bomber. It had better armor and with its four wings it was more maneuverable at high speeds than the LAAT, but it was an expensive platform. Therefore, it was only used by the elite of the Imperial Army. ARCs or Imperial Commandos, or in this case, shadow troopers. Eight of them fast-roped down nearby the abandoned snipers nest, approaching cautiously. They were looking down, searching for tripwires. They hadn't thought of looking straight ahead, and in the low light between the tree branches it was hard to see the fine plastic wire.

The thermal detonator Jun had taken off a storm trooper the previous night exploded with tremendous force, incinerating everything within a three-meter radius.

Jun smiled grimly. He didn't think he had killed all eight of the shadow troopers, but at least three of them had been in the blast area. If they wanted to pursue him, fine. But the Spartan-III would bleed them every chance he got.

His smile faded as he realized the MAAT wasn't leaving. The warbling was constant, changing pitch slightly as it moved back and forth. It was scanning the area, Jun realized. If it was a thermal scan, he was in luck. The MJOLNIR armor masked heat, making him invisible in infrared. If it was a motion tracker, it wouldn't work either; he was motionless, lying face-down in the dirt. Life-sign scan? It was possible, and if it was, he was screwed.

The engine pitch went higher and faded away as the MAAT left.

Jun finally dared to breath. He hadn't realized that he'd been holding his breath, but he supposed that it was a survival instinct hardwired into every human being. Still, he counted himself lucky. Foot-soldiers he could deal with, and he had the munitions to take on light armor. He wouldn't even think about taking on a gunship without at least a scoped ARC-920 railgun.

The RV point was now only seven miles away. If he ran, he could make it in minutes. But snipers don't run, unless something has gone terribly wrong. He moved slowly and carefully, a hunted man. What the Imperials were learning, however, was that a Spartan made deadly prey. They would pursue at their own peril.

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**0825 hrs, November 10****th****, 2561 (Military Calendar)/  
>ISD <strong>**_Vector_****, Imperial Task Force Blackwing  
>Zeta Halo<strong>
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Commander Julian Grey, ORION-019, reflected on the number of times he had been captured by the enemy. He had never been captured by Covenant, since they had rarely taken prisoners. He'd been captured once by Insurrectionists, and they had beaten him almost to the point of death when they realized what he was. He had been rescued by a group of Beta Company Spartans, though he did not know the difference between the Twos and the Threes at the time. The second time he'd been captured by Insurrectionists, he had intentionally let them grab him so he could gain access to their base. He'd then broken out easily, killing several guards and allowing a backup team inside the base to kill the rest. The third time was during the Clone Wars, when a UNSC op against the Death Watch had gone belly-up. That time, he'd been rescued by none other than Obi-Wan Kenobi.

This would be the fourth time, he realized, sitting in a cell inside a Star Destroyer. There were no bars or doors for the cells on this ship, merely a thin but impermeable energy barrier that had a pale red glow. He had tested it, pushing on it at different points to test for weakness. It might as well have been made of titanium. He had also, to his displeasure, discovered that the guards could send a powerful electric charge through the barrier if he maintained contact with it for too long. In the ceiling, a tiny vent recycled the air. In the corner, a commode-sink combo welded to the deck was his only option for freshening up and going to the bathroom.

There was no way he would escape this cell on his own.

Across from his cell, Grey saw several other identical cells. Eight were occupied, four of them by captured ODSTs. Despite being stripped of armor as he was, they still wore black-grey camouflage BDU pants and black shirts with the Helljumper logo on them. The other four cells were occupied by several different aliens and humans, whom Grey assumed to be either Rebel Alliance or criminals of some sort.

One of the ODSTs, a woman with close-cropped red hair, sat up when she saw Grey looking at her. "You're awake?" she asked in a distinctly Canadian accent. "How're you feeling?"

"Like I've been hit over the head," Grey replied. He remembered rolling to the side to dodge a grenade, then falling into a hole that

he hadn't seen in the dark.

"I saw them bringing you in. You were out cold. I thought you might be dead."

"Not yet."

"Hey, you're the guy who landed three days ago with those three Spartans, yeah?"

"Yes." Something clicked in Grey's head. "When were you captured?"

"Day before yesterday. Imps brought in some serious reinforcements, surrounded our outpost. We held them off for a while, but we ran out of ammo. Once they figured that out, they just ran up and stunned us." She shook her head. "Doesn't figure. They didn't take prisoners before."

"They didn't have enough people to spare to guard prisoners before their reinforcements arrived," Grey said.

The ODST didn't look convinced. "That's one way of looking at it."

"What's your name, Marine?"

"Sergeant Alex Delacroix. You're Commander Grey, right? I've gotta say, you're pretty ballsy for an old-timer."

The corners of Grey's mouth quirked into what might've been a smile. "Some things don't change."

"Yeah?"

"ODSTs have always been rude. It's a comforting constant."

Delacroix laughed. "We'd lose our reputation if we started being soft on swabbies." After a pause, she asked, "You got a plan to get our butts out of here, Commander?"

"No."

Delacroix was visibly disappointed. "Should've seen that one coming," she muttered.

"My apologies. I meant to say that I've yet to formulate a complete plan."

"That's better. What's the part you've completed, if you're OK with telling us?"

"Killing any Imperial that gets in our way."

"Getting ahead of yourself, aren't you?"

"You asked the question."

"He got you there," said another ODST.

"Shut up, Warren," Delacroix snapped.

After a while, Grey asked, "Have they tortured you?"

"No, and that's the odd thing. We've been well-fed, and the day they brought us in they had a doc give everyone a physical. You must've been out cold for yours."

"I could always try to break out when they take me to the physical," Grey noted.

"There's no point trying to escape."

All eyes locked onto the source of the last statement: a Zabrak woman with light-red skin. "Why not?" Delacroix asked.

"If you try to escape, they'll just lock down the whole cell block and gas us."

Grey stood to try and get a better look at her. "You're Rebel Alliance, aren't you?"

The Zabrak nodded, a proud look on her face. "Alliance Ninety-Eighth Special Operations Battalion, based out of Iridonia. Captain Sana Sazen, at your service."

"Do you know anything about this ship?"

Sazen nodded, a grim look on her face. "_Vector_. It's an appropriate name, since its roleâ€"

"Biological warfare," Grey finished. "We've heard of this ship before, but no one from our side has actually seen it until now." He frowned. "Considering our current location, this could prove to be a disaster of cataclysmic proportions."

"And where is that?" When Grey didn't answer, she said, "I think you're Special Forces, like me. I know the drill: need-to-know and all. But if this affects you, then it affects the Alliance. We need to know what's going on here."

"Let's put it this way," Delacroix said. "If the stuff on the installation gets off said installation, we're all royally fucked."

Zabraks don't have eyebrows, but the expression she made was instantly recognizable. "That's certainly bad, then."

"You think?"

"What kind of gas do they use?" Grey asked.

"Null gas," Sazen answered. "Neutralizes the oxygen in the air."

"And will they release the gas if their own people are in the area?"

She nodded. "Stormie helmets have filters, and the Empire's more than willing to gas its own people to get something done. Friendly fire's

not really much of a concern for them."

"And is it likely they'll release the gas if a high ranking officer is present?"

"That's a different scenario. The crew won't want to gas their superiors."

"I see." Grey sat back down. A plan was beginning to form, the pieces were becoming clear. All he needed was a little time to put them together.

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0825 hrs, November 10**th****, 2561 (Military Calendar)/

>UNSC-Controlled Zone, Zeta Halo

Carris-137 had been in a lot of scrapes since her augmentations over thirty years ago. Insurrectionists, Covenant, Flood, Separatists, and now Imperials had all given their level best to kill her. Through quick-thinking, relying on her training and no small amount of luck, she had defeated all such attempts. She'd even fought Asajj Ventress in hand-to-hand combat and survived.

Now, she was on a Forerunner installation, fleeing from a massive Imperial invasion force into a rapidly-shrinking UNSC-controlled area. She had to get back to Anders Station as soon as she could in order to get the Index and return it to the Libraryâ€| which was on the opposite side of the ring. There was no time to waste. The Imperials were on the move, and if the Index stayed where it was there was a chance the Empire might accidentally set off the Halo Effect.

That wouldn't happen while she was alive. Carris had sworn that to herself.

The weapons she had originally set out with were gone. She had stumbled across the area where, weeks before, Alpha Company had been slaughtered. The Imperials hadn't bothered to police the UNSC weapons, instead dumping them into a large ditchâ€"a bad move. Carris was now armed to the teeth, wielding a BR85 Battle Rifle. A trusty M45D Tactical Shotgun was strapped to her back, and she also had an M6H and an M363 Remote Projectile Detonator on her right and left leg, respectively. Aside from that, she also had four grenades clipped to her belt.

The Spartan-II moved through the trees, careful to stay away from any clearings. Even here, behind UNSC lines, she had to be careful. The Empire had more than enough numbers to force their way through, and they weren't big on subtlety when they had such an advantage. She had seen such tactics during the Clone Wars, on a backwater world whose name she had forgotten. Against the pitiful few thousand defenders, the GAR had fielded an entire Corps. To call what had followed a one-sided slaughter would have been understatement. The Empire hadn't changed those tactics much.

Her COM crackled to life. _"FOB Cobra to Sierra-137, is that you in the trees?"_

Carris relaxed a fraction. Forward Operating Base Cobra was one of the perimeter FOBs, part of a defensive ring within the UNSC Zone. It, like the other FOBs, was manned by ODS'Ts and outfitted with an array of weapons for any situation. It meant friendly soldiers and ammunition. "Affirmative, FOB Cobra." She realized she hadn't changed her call-sign to NOBLE Four yet.

"Well, hustle up in here, Spartan. Imperial forces are almost on us, and we could use some extra hands."

"Copy. NOBLE Four is Oscar-Mike."

Two minutes later, she saw the steel and permacrete barriers and walls surrounded by a ring of barbed wire that was FOB Cobra. Two M247H machine guns flanked the entry point, which was sealed by a blue energy shield. An M68 Gauss Cannon sat on the wall above and to the side of the entry point. Beyond, Carris knew there was an M79 MLRS rocket turret. Inside an armored shed would be a rack of flamethrowers—odd equipment for any other similar base, but they were useful against the Flood. All this firepower was meant for a Flood outbreak or a Covenant assault, so it would be very useful in fighting an Imperial attack.

The shield vanished and two ODS'Ts waved her in. One of them threw a rough salute. "Lance Corporal Brian Dodd, ma'am. We engaged the Imps an hour ago. Lost a 'Hog, two guys and the Gunny, with nothing to show for it."

"You drove them off," Carris noted. "That counts for something."

Dodd shrugged. "They're coming up for round two, or leastways that's what the perimeter sensors are saying."

"Did you see anyone from NOBLE?"

"You mean that other team of Spartans?"

"I'm on that team now. Did you see them?"

Dodd shook his head. "We heard that your op got fucked, but we're just focusing on staying alive."

Carris didn't say anything. All of those Spartans were good, even the old-timer from Project ORION. To think they might've been captured or killed—

"I see 'em!" said another ODS'T. "Two fighter tanks, 2-M type; thirty-six infantry, stormtrooper type; four AT-RTs."

"Dammit," Dodd muttered. Including the Spartan, there were only ten UNSC personnel in FOB Cobra. "Ma'am, you any good with a Gauss?"

"Fairly." She was a certified expert with the M68.

"Then get on it. Ma'am."

Carris did just that, bounding over to the M68 and charging it up just in time to see the first AT-RT sprint into the kill-zone.

The All-Terrain-Recon-Transport was a one-man bipedal walker, used by pathfinder and scout units. It was armed with a laser cannon and a mortar, and thanks to its light construction it was incredibly fast. It could even leap a significant distance, making for a very maneuverable platform. However, it was only lightly armored and the driver was completely exposed. Neither of these drawbacks concerned the Empire. Soldiers and walkers were cheap for them. There was always more.

In this particular case, however, the advantage was for the UNSC. The M68 fired, sending a 25x130mm slug through the air at 49001.76 kilometers per second, or just under Mach 40. The report was deafeningly loud for those without hearing protection. The slug struck the AT-RT head on, blasting it and the pilot apart. Bits of stormtrooper and durasteel pin-wheeled through the air. The next AT-RT fared no better.

Carris ignored the infantry; the M68 was too powerful to waste against mere stormtroopers, and in any case the ODSTs had it covered. The two M247s at the entrance were pouring fire onto the enemy infantry, supplemented by ODSTs on the wall firing their own weapons. Two of them had M739 SAWs, while the rest had MA5Ds, M7 SMGs and BR85s. It was an impressive racket.

One of the 2-M tanks appeared, firing almost as soon as it came into view. The blast struck the upper portion of the wall, killing two ODSTs and injuring a SAW gunner. Carris silenced it immediately. Another AT-RT bounded into view, blasting one of the M247 emplacements before Carris destroyed it as well. The second 2-M tank appeared, but it didn't get a chance to fire; one ODST fired an M41 rocket launcher, emptying both tubes and destroying the tank. He had to stand up to take the shot, however, and even as he dropped the launcher a blaster bolt struck him in the center of his face. The ODST fell to the ground like a pile of bricks, a smoking hole in his visor. Another died with a shout as a blaster bolt struck him square in the chest. Carris was forced to wield the M68 against the stormtroopers, blasting them to bloody chunks but not before destroying the last AT-RT.

Just as it seemed that they would be overrun, however, the remaining Imperials retreated. It was clear that they couldn't stomach losing six vehicles and several infantry enough to push the attack. They would regroup, get reinforcements and try again. They had killed at least five of the ODSTs.

"Sound off," Dodd said. Carris was wrong; two more ODSTs had died without uttering a sound, one being the injured SAW gunner.

"We can't take another assault like that," one ODST said, panting. She had been running around to collect the dogtags off her fallen comrades.

"Agreed," Carris said. "Dodd, you have any more 'Hogs?"

"Two more, a Gauss Hog and a Rocket Hog."

She turned to the other two ODSTs. "Either of you certified for an M79?"

"I am," said one. His IFF tag identified him as PFC Hunter Ross.

The other one was a PFC Lana Drake. "I can drive a 'Hog pretty good."

Carris turned to Dodd. "Does this place have a self-destruct?"

Dodd nodded. "Whole place is wired with charges. To authorize it, you have to input the code on a laptop in there." He pointed to a large tent. "But the codes were with the Gunny."

"Don't worry about that. You three, warm up the Hogs. Ross and Drake will go in the Rocket Hog, Dodd and I'll be in the other. Let's move, people."

As they prepped the vehicles, Carris moved to the laptop. She input: _ACTIVATE SELF DESTRUCT_.

The screen flashed: _CODE REQUIRED_.

She smiled. _OVERRIDE AUTHORIZATION SIERRA-137_. She input a few more commands

The screen flashed again. _OVERRIDE ACCEPTED. DETONATION IN 00:00:30._

The 'Hogs roared to life. Without wasting a second, Carris dashed over to Dodd's vehicle, jumping into the turret. As soon as her boots touched the foot-rests, Dodd gunned it. Drake followed close behind, and both were well away when the Imperials entered the base. The base promptly blew up in their faces, burying several stormtroopers with the dead ODSs. The Battle for FOB Cobra was over.

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0900 hrs, November 10**th****, 2561 (Military Calendar)/

>Anders Station
UNSC-Controlled Zone, Zeta Halo**

"You are a _failure_ of a Spartan!"

Blade's voice echoed throughout the Control Room, drawing the attention of the scientists working within. They stared at the Commander and the Spartan in black armor, the target of his wrath. The Spartan was impassive, as far as they could tell. His silver visor hid his face.

Nobody could see that he was gritting his teeth.

"We just intercepted a message that confirms Commander Grey's been captured," Blade continued. "How the fuck did you become the leader of a team of Spartans?"

The Spartan didn't say a word. Behind him, another Spartan in white armor stepped forward. "The situation changed, sir. We were overwhelmed. We hadâ€œ"

"Shut the fuck up, I wasn't talking to you!"

At that, the first Spartan stirred. "If you have a problem with me,

you talk to _me_."

"What was that?"

"I said, don't fucking scream at _my_ people. You may not approve of my leading a team. I don't care; the chief of Section Three gave me this job himself, so take it up with him. Until such a time as he says otherwise, NOBLE is my team. Back off."

A third Spartan in dark green armor walked in, standing behind the first. "We could show you our HUD playback. We didn't have much of a choice."

Then the fourth Spartan ran in. This one all the scientists recognized: Lieutenant Carris. "Commander, FOB Cobra's gone."

Still rankled by the way Blade had treated Rosenda, Daniel was nonetheless concerned. "We passed through Cobra on the way back here, early today morning."

"What happened?" Blade asked, momentarily distracted.

"Imps hit it in force. I helped out with the defense, but they killed most of the ODSs there. We blew it up behind us, and that slowed them down." Carris shook her head. "They caught up with us. AT-RTs and fighter tanks. We fought a moving battle all the way to the Tube. Checkpoint Three took care of the rest."

"Not good," Blade said. "With Cobra gone, we have a gap in our defensive perimeter."

"Then we have to plug the hole," Daniel said.

Blade shot Daniel a look that could cut steel. "I won't take advice from a fuck-up like you."

"What's your plan, then?" Daniel asked. "Hunker down here? Stick your head in the sand? We have tanks, don't we? A company of four Scorpion MBTs, right outside. How maneuverable do you think they'll be in that little area outside? We'll take the fight to them, hold them back until reinforcements arrive."

"No."

"I wasn't asking your permission."

Blade's eyes narrowed. All eyes in the Control Room were completely focused on the group of Spartans. "You don't have the authority." The two Navy Commandos guarding the door entered at his signal, aiming their weapons at Daniel.

"Was it tough, cooped up on this ring?" Daniel took one step forward, ignoring the commandos. "How long since you've actually gone into the field? Five years, maybe even ten, I'm guessing. You've lost touch. Without Colonel Han, you don't know how to deploy the ODSs effectively."

"And you do?"

"Yes."

"And what do you propose to do?"

Daniel crossed his arms. "I thought I'd start by removing you from command by invoking the authority granted to me by SPECWAR/Group Three."

Blade didn't move for a moment. Then his right hand twitched slightly toward the M6 in his holster. In the blink of an eye, Daniel drew his own pistol, leveling it squarely at Blade's forehead. Jun and Rosenda moved between the commandos' weapons and NOBLE One, shielding him from harm.

"You're not fast enough to outdraw me," Daniel said. "Even if you did, the armor could take the one shot you'd get off."

Blade had a whole new look in his eyes now. "You really are a Spartan, aren't you?"

"Damn right."

Blade nodded, as if confirming something for himself. "I hereby transfer command of all UNSC forces on Zeta Halo to NOBLE One. Authorization Zero-Five-Alpha-Tango."

Daniel was visibly taken aback. "I didn't expect that to be so easy."

"I'll explain later. Now you have a job to do." He nodded to the commandos, who lowered their weapons.

"Where's the Index?" Carris asked.

Blade walked over to an armored box, punched in a code and withdrew a T-shaped Forerunner device. He handed it to Daniel. "This is the key to set off the Halo Array. We kept it here for the science types to study, but now that there are hostiles on the ring it's best to return it to the Library."

"The Library?"

Blade tapped a console, bringing up a holographic image of an odd building. "A Forerunner structure used to house the Index. Once it's returned there, it should be safe enough."

Daniel nodded. "Carris, Jun: take a commando team and get the Index to the Library as fast as humanly possible."

"What about us?" Rosenda asked.

"We're gonna take a company of ODSTs and one of the Scorpions to retake what's left of FOB Cobra. It seems the most likely route for their ground forces to take. Who's the senior ODST commander after Han? Get him up here. We need to talk."

Blade shook his head. "The battalion XO was killed in an incident with the Flood."

"There's got to be a Captain among them that's up for the job."

One of the commandos approached them. "I think that would be Captain al-Khourri, Charlie Company. Veteran of the Covenant War and the Clone Wars. He commands a lot of respect."

"Get him up here. Now."

"Aye aye, sir."

A minute later, an ODST with a HUL module attached to his helmet walked in. "Captain Mohammed al-Khourri, reporting as ordered."

"Captain," Daniel began. "I'm promoting you to Major. You're in command of the battalion now."

Al-Khourri cocked his head to one side. "I'm not sure you can do that."

"You'll have to talk to your division commander to make it official, but right now, you bet your ass I can promote you. Can you run the battalion, Major?"

"I won't be able to go into the field, can I?"

"That hardly matters with a foe like this. Most likely they'll try to attack you directly."

"Ah, now that is something I'm familiar with. I can run the battalion, Commander," al-Khourri said. "What do you need me to do?"

"Coordinate the defense. Deploy the Scorpions as best you can. I'm going to take one to FOB Cobra to plug the hole there."

"Understood. I'll lend you a platoon from Charlie as well." He paused for a moment. "The men guarding FOB Cobra were from Charlie Company. The survivors extend their thanks to Lieutenant Carris, and say they're ready to head back out should you need them. We'll do our part, Navy."

"I know you will," Daniel said. "Which brings me to you, Commander Blade. You know how to deploy your commandos. I want sniper teams locking down any point of approach that's not guarded by ODST snipers. Have the rest of the fireteams as QRF. Any target of opportunity is yours."

"Understood," Blade said.

Daniel turned to the door, grabbing his carbine as he did so. "We've all got our jobs, people. Let's make it happen."

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End
file.